



JOHN CREWS

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BY

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CHAPTER I

THE voice of Baptiste Boucard came to me, as I awoke, long after sunrise.

For a few minutes I lay on my bed of buffalo robes and listened. Baptiste's songs were unlike those sung by other men on the Western plains. Many a man I had heard sing at the camp-fire, and often had I listened to the choruses of *voyageurs*, as those adventurers poled their way up the Missouri or the Yellowstone when there were no Indians to be feared. But Baptiste's songs were fragments of his own thoughts, set to melodies that seemed to have been bequeathed to him by the upland winds. Most of his songs were of the outdoors, and were born of his love for the high plateau and its mountain fringe, but sometimes a touch of sentiment crept into his singing, and then I knew that his thoughts were of his boyhood in the great town of St. Louis, foster mother of nearly all the hardy souls who were risking their lives in reaping the fur harvests.

It was such a song that had roused me. Baptiste sang it in French, but I give the words in English:

Though you may wander the whole world o'er,
By mountain and plain and sea,
Though you beach your keel on the farthest shore,
Still must you come to me.
For the call of the heart is the strongest call,
Its lure is the strongest lure,
And so you must turn to me, after all —
Of that I am sure, I am sure.

The flap of our teepee was open, and through its inverted 'V' I could see Baptiste busying himself about the fire. Shining in the new sun was Fort Laramie, which only a few months before had been Fort William, and had been owned by the American Fur Company, whose partisan, Bruce Husband, was even now at the post, closing the details of sale with the commandant representing the Government. Behind the fort stretched the hills to the west, a maze of brown and green in which the long white trail from the east lost itself.

The wall of our teepee hid the view to the eastward. It was a Sioux teepee, and on it some artist-warrior had painted a noble charger, whose outlines I could trace from where I lay. But I knew every detail of the landscape outside — the broad, swirling Platte, brightened for a short distance by the sparkling waters of the Laramie, and at once loved and cursed by those who followed the great trail at its side. Some men I had seen burying their dead beside the sandy wastes of the stream, praying God to take them where they might never again gaze on the sinister watercourse. Others had

I seen kneeling beside it in thankfulness, as their half-dead cattle drank of the sand-roiled but life-giving water — men whose outfits had strayed from the trail and who had escaped death only through one of those kindly chances which Fate intersperses so liberally with her frontier cruelties.

A brisk laving of head and shoulders in the Laramie quickly divorced me from any dreams that might have clung to me, and I dressed hastily and soon was sitting beside the fire where Baptiste had prepared our plain but appetizing fare, for I must needs confess that, so far as concerns us men of the buckskin, hunger is a companion that needs scant urging to keep pace with us. Buffalo meat, nicely broiled, had Baptiste prepared, with hot cakes and real syrup therefor, and the bottoms of our coffee-cups thick with sugar. Such treats of sweetness we allowed ourselves only when at the fort. Often in the wilderness, when we depended on our rifles alone for our food, we found it necessary to go for weeks, like the Indians, without so much as salt as a savor to our meat.

‘Baptiste,’ said I to my companion as he approached with our coffee, ‘how comes it that in all your poetry there runs some thought of women? In all the time we have trapped together we have seen none but Indian women. Yet I know you are not singing of those.’

Baptiste set down the coffee, and, standing to

his full height of six feet, looked thoughtfully down upon me, not smiling as I had expected. A slender lad, yet swift and strong, was Baptiste. His was the strength of the bowstring, as he was not big-thewed, like myself. His face was dark, and delicately chiseled as a woman's, and generally it was merry, save when it had borrowed something of the wistful melancholy that occasionally shone from his gray eyes. Nor could Baptiste engage in sport or task without bringing to it something of personal grace.

'I am not singing of Indian women, John Crews,' said Baptiste. 'You know that we have not lived like most of the other trappers, you and I. You are grave and silent, and the Indian women are afraid of you. With me they laugh and make merry, but with no thought of love. The songs I sing are made to women with fair skins, and with speech like our own.'

'Such women we have not seen, Baptiste, since we left the fur-burdened wharves of old St. Louis.'

'Some day the white women will come by thousands over that trail,' replied Baptiste, pointing to the wide highway that bordered the Platte. 'May they get the faithful love that they deserve for turning to this wild land.'

'If they do not, it would be better for them to be buried like the girl whose headstone we saw on the other side of the Devil's Gate.'

While we were talking thus, we were eating

breakfast, as were those in most of the other camps, white and red, which circled the fort. It was our custom to talk seriously or banteringlly on whatever matters arose in our camp. There were long hours of loneliness, more particularly in winter, when we knew none other than our own companionship. Each was familiar with the details of the other's life. I knew that Baptiste was a French waif — son of a trapper who had been taken to Fort St. Vrain dying, after a fight with a grizzly bear. Baptiste's mother had died at St. Louis, the boy being brought up in an orphanage there. It was at St. Louis that I had met Baptiste. As boys we had haunted the water-front, where the boatmen came in with their precious loads of furs from the far land of adventure in the Northwest.

Like Baptiste, I had no kin to claim me. My mother had died in an Ohio River town. My father, who had long followed the great streams of the Middle West as a boatman, was drowned in the upsetting of his barge in the Upper Missouri. I was brought up in haphazard fashion by an uncle in St. Louis. My uncle, though he gave little enough attention to my physical wants, let me have the free run of his library, because books kept me out of his way. Also he allowed me to go to school, instead of binding me out as an apprentice, as he might have done. There was a certain kindliness about him, for all his forgetful-

ness, and probably I should have gone to clerking for him had he not died when I was sixteen. With the last blood link thus snapped, I gave ear to the urge of the West. Baptiste swore that I should not go without him, so we both hired out as wagon helpers when one of the American Fur Company's outfits was made up at St. Louis.

We were no strangers to the trappers who took us on our first trip across the plains. We had become known to many of them at St. Louis, so persistently had we frequented the wharves there. But of the realities of the West we had little conception, though we had often tried to picture the country and the life from the talk of the men. In our party were several of the company's most successful trappers. They seemed to delight in imparting information to us, and, with the assurance of youth, we felt capable of shifting for ourselves by the time we had completed a rather uneventful journey up the Platte to Fort Laramie, then a company post.

At the fort our party was broken up. Some pushed on to the West; others ventured into the North, and Baptiste and I followed the fortunes of a little band of six that sought the headwaters of the Laramie, well past the spot where old Jacques La Ramée had been killed by the Indians he had befriended. Here we found plenty of fur for the taking, and the Indians few and those friendly enough.

When we returned to the fort, Baptiste and I made a covenant that the East should know us no more — that we should stay always in this land of enchantment. When we were not trapping, it was agreed that we should hunt the buffalo for Bruce Husband, the shrewd and kindly partisan who had taken a fancy to us, no doubt on account of our youth and our enthusiasm for adventure.

Three years did we spend in such fashion, and two years atop of those we spent in the North, where Blackfeet and Sioux were insatiable in their hunt for white scalps. We hunted with many bands of trappers, and met the greatest and most skillful, including such men as Matthieu, 'Black Harris,' 'Old Charlefou,' Bissonette, and the most masterful and at the same time the kindest of all, Christopher Carson. We mingled with men from Bent and St. Vrain and Taos, and ever we heard talk of the newest in guns and of traps and baits, and the fur promise of certain streams, and the temper of this Indian tribe and that.

Our lives would soon have been snuffed out, had we not made it our business to cultivate the friendship of the Indians. Some there were, among the tribes that visited the fort, that aroused instinctive distrust, just as there are certain groups of white men that stir antagonism at first sight. The Sioux seemed to be the most quarrelsome, not because their disposition was

basically more evil than that of other tribes, but because they were more numerous and powerful — and a sense of power has spoiled many white men. The Cheyennes we esteemed as even braver fighters than the Sioux, with whom they were often associated in combat. The Crows were generally peacefully inclined toward white men. All the Indians would steal horses, because the theft of those animals, without reprisal, was an honor. By watching our horses and keeping our weapons handy, we got along with the worst of the Indians, and with the most of them we were welcome to their lodges, and our belongings were scattered freely in their camps, with none to disturb.

Even the brief time we had spent in the Rocky Mountain country had wrought many changes. The great trail along the Platte was more traveled every day. The deep ruts made by heavy wagons were being extended until the trail no longer looked like a mere road, but resembled the wide course that had been taken by some vast army. The fort, which had been the headquarters of trappers and Indians, was now crowded with emigrants. Finally the soldiers had come, and it was said the Government intended to make the fort a great military post.

‘Frankly, I do not like the new order of things at the fort,’ I said to Baptiste. ‘The trappers have been able to get along well with the Indians,

but the soldiers that are being sent out here know little of Indian nature and seem to court trouble.'

'The Indians are talking in the same strain,' said Baptiste. 'Only yesterday some Sioux, who had gone to the fort out of curiosity, were driven forth, with their families, like so many cattle. The Sioux young men are angry, and are paying little heed to the counsels of the older men.'

'The foolish Indians do not realize how numerous are the white people,' I rejoined. 'Many a time have I tried to tell them of the great crowds and the wonderful buildings in St. Louis. Either my tongue is not eloquent enough, or they think I am trying to deceive them deliberately, for I know by their attitude that they do not believe there can be any such village with wooden and stone teepees, and with great fishes traveling in the rivers and carrying burdens.'

'They are children, and always will be children,' observed Baptiste sadly. 'The pity of it is that they must suffer so for their ignorance. I, too, have tried to tell them of the futility of fighting against the hosts of white people, but it has been useless. The warlike spirit of the Sioux and Cheyennes will lead them to destruction, and the peace-loving Crows will suffer with the rest.'

Not so much as closing the flap to our teepee, for, with the exception of his horses, one could leave his property unguarded anywhere on the plains, we caught our ponies and rode toward the

fort, which made a brave appearance in the flood of morning sunlight. The walls had been plastered with adobe, after the manner of the forts in the Southwest, some Mexicans at the post a year or two before having done the work. The wide gate was guarded by a bastion, from which watch was kept on the surrounding country. A war party would have found it impossible to storm such a stronghold. To-day the teepees of friendly Indians were under the very walls of the fort. All about were lodge clusters, showing where various tribes had come to trade peltries for food, or perhaps for beads and gew-gaws of various sorts.

'It all strikes me as a matter of equal vanity,' I said to Baptiste, as we paused a moment to survey the scene. 'These Indians who barter pelts for bright and useless ornaments are trading things which will do them little or no good. The skins which they sell are being used by the white men mostly to deck out their women, or to make beaver hats for the town dandies. Coats of wool and hats of felt would answer just as well, so far as utility is concerned — yet the Indian is laughed at for his vanity.'

As we looked down the trail we saw a dust-cloud made by a horseman. It was an emigrant, pale and exhausted, who had cut loose a horse from a wagon team. As he passed us near the fort, he shouted that Indians were attacking a wagon-train, not many miles down the river. We

followed him through the gate, and, as we did so, heard the bugle sound and saw the newly arrived troopers saddling their horses and preparing to go to the rescue.

CHAPTER II

SADDLE SONG

I must ride out on the plains,
A horse 'twixt knee and knee,
With foam on my slackened reins
Like spume from an angry sea;
With the wolf's howl echoing,
And the stars low overhead;
There, 'neath the eagle's wing,
Forth let my horse be led.

I must ride out on the plains,
Where the cactus flowers gleam,
And the spurs sound tinkling strains
Like fairy bells in a dream;
Where the wild, sweet odors rise
And the hoofs beat martial strains,
Under far Western skies
I must ride out on the plains.

From the Wilderness Songs of BAPTISTE BOUCARD

THERE was a motley assembly in the fort as we entered. The compound was filled with soldiers, trappers, traders, emigrants, and Indians. The emigrants were much excited when they heard of the Indian raid. They had come over the trail only a day or two before, and were talking loudly about their narrow escape. Some were telling what they would have done if the Indians had attacked them.

From the one-roomed houses that lined the compound walls came the families of the employees of the fort — mostly Indian women with

broods of half-breed children. The babble of voices rose above the calls of the troopers as they saddled their mounts, and from the confusion one might be led to think that an attack had been launched against the fort itself.

Suddenly a heavy voice rose above the din, as Bruce Husband, who had long kept order at the post before it passed out of the American Fur Company's hands, shouldered his way to the center of the compound and with a few words sent the women and children scattering back to their homes.

'Here, John Crews, and you, Baptiste, come here!' called the partisan, motioning to us as we sat on our horses, surveying the scene with no small amusement.

We dismounted and led our horses where Husband was standing, with a young lieutenant who was in charge in the absence of the commandant.

'I have been telling the lieutenant,' said Husband, with a sly wink at me, 'that it might be just as well to have you and Baptiste go along in case it may be necessary to leave the trail and go in pursuit of the Indians. I have told him that you are the best guides who could possibly be chosen.'

The young lieutenant looked relieved, as this was the first responsibility that had devolved upon him, and he was pale and nervous. Bruce Husband knew that the slightest misstep might start

a war with the Indians, hence he was eager to have us go along to keep the soldiers from any rash act which might lead to the slaughter of all the white people in and near the fort.

‘I agree with Mr. Husband that it will be well to take guides along,’ said the lieutenant. ‘I am taking twenty men. In case it is needful to attack in force, I will send one of these trappers back for more soldiers, who will be held in readiness to act as reinforcements,’ he added, addressing the partisan.

Putting himself at the head of his men, and with Baptiste and myself on either side of him, the lieutenant gave a word of command, and we dashed through the gate, scattering the motley crowd and being followed to the ford by a swarm of barking dogs. The emigrant who had brought the news was left at the fort, because apparently he was too exhausted to return with us. He said that Indians had appeared suddenly in his camp, which was only a few miles distant, and he had no doubt that the entire party was quickly massacred.

I doubted much that an attack would be launched so near the fort, but I knew that anything might happen in this Western country. Indeed, I had seen the time when it looked as if the fort itself would be the object of attack, so nothing of the sort was to be set down as impossible.

As we reached a swale, three or four miles from

the fort, I could see a dust-cloud behind us, and knew that the Indian warriors who had been encamped about the post were following us. I told the lieutenant that Baptiste and I had better go back and try to induce them to return to the fort, as the fewer Indians we had to deal with, the better. He gave his consent and held his command while Baptiste and I rode back and halted a numerous body of Sioux and Cheyennes, recruited hastily, yet riding in war formation and many of them with war bonnets trailing. At a signal from me, the chief rode out of the dust-cloud which hovered over the band.

It was Long Arm, a Cheyenne sub-chief who came forth to meet us. The others, on their uneasy ponies, waited within earshot.

'Long Arm,' I said to the Cheyenne, 'there is no need for you and your Sioux brothers to come. You know that I, John Crews, and Baptiste Boucard are not double-tongued. We are confident that there has been no real attack on a wagon-train. The man who rode to the fort is some fool, no doubt, who saw friendly Indians approaching and let terror spur him for aid. Return to the fort and trust us to keep the soldiers from any conflict with your people.'

Long Arm turned to his followers and said:

'You have heard the words of Iron Hand. You know that it has been growing more and more difficult for our people to keep the peace. Most of

the white man's promises have been broken, and the men who are coming over the trail, and the soldiers who are coming to the fort, are not our friends at heart. But these men who are speaking to us we can trust. Shall we listen to their counsel and go back, or shall we go on as we started?'

There was some murmuring among the younger men in the party, but I suspect that the sight of the soldiers, waiting behind us, had something to do with the final decision, which was to return. As the band turned back, we galloped on and overtook the soldiers, the lieutenant being greatly pleased at our report.

A few miles farther on, we could see the emigrant train drawn in a circle at the side of the trail, and could distinguish the figures of Indians moving in and out among the wagons. The lieutenant was for charging and scattering the Indians, as he believed every one with the train had been slain, but Baptiste and I convinced him that it would be better to go slowly, and that he would probably find that no great harm had been done.

Our prophecy was borne out. We found that the train consisted of Mormons, on their way to the new settlement at Great Salt Lake. They were having their first experience with plains Indians. A large band of Oglala¹ Sioux, who, with the Brûlés, were most inclined to let their strong and

¹ 'She scattered her own.' Corrupted into 'Ogalala' and 'Ogalalla.'

fearless dispositions get them into trouble, had sighted the train from afar and had moved in upon it. The emigrants did not know the value of keeping up a brave front. They were plainly frightened, and the Indians became proportionately bold. They ate the meal which the emigrants had prepared for themselves, and then demanded more. The women retired to the covered wagons, for the most part, and the Indians took great joy in frightening them by peering under the canvas.

The emigrant who had given the alarm had ridden off at first sight of the Sioux, and the Indians had not thought it worth while to follow him.

With the marauders I saw a free trapper known as Le Crochet, or The Hook. The last two fingers on The Hook's right hand had been frozen off. The thumb and remaining fingers were bent in the form of a hook or claw. In spite of this handicap, Le Crochet was as skillful as any man I have ever known in handling traps, and was also celebrated as a rifle shot. He had wonderful power in his deformed hand, and was said to have slain many men by throttling them. Some men there are who must always walk the border-line of outlawry and The Hook was one of those. There was ample scope for the exercise of evil in a country where individual might was the only law, and The Hook had made the most of his opportunities. The

hatred and fear that the better element held toward him merely brought him pleasure. This was not the first time, according to reasonably based tradition, that he had gone marauding with the Sioux.

The men with the wagon-train would have been bold enough, no doubt, under the right leadership, but with nobody to advise them, they did not know what to do. Conciliation had seemed to be the best policy, and from conciliation many of them had drifted to fear.

Our approach had been unobserved, even The Hook being so engrossed in the possibilities of loot or what-not deviltry that he had failed to notice our coming. The lieutenant and I, with Baptiste, entered the circle of wagons, leaving the troopers outside. I sought out the Oglala chief, who, with The Hook, stood in the center of the enclosure, amid a crowd grouped about some object of extraordinary interest. When I shouldered my way through the crowd, with Baptiste and the lieutenant, I found that the object which had excited so much curiosity was a wonderfully made barouche, beside which stood an old gentleman with snow-white beard and dignified bearing, with his arm about the shoulders of a young girl whose radiant beauty was such that I forgot the Indians and The Hook and all else and could only stand with jaw unhinged, gazing my fill.

The girl was not more than eighteen — perhaps

not that old, for all her womanliness. She was slight of figure, yet graceful as the willows I had seen drooping over the wild streams where the water ouzels flit in the spray. Her dress was of finer material than any I had ever seen on other women who were making the rough trip overland. Her black hair hung about her shoulders in glossy masses. As the wind blew a straying tress across her face, she brushed it back with a white hand. Her features were perfectly formed, and even her present agitation had not driven the delicate color from her cheeks. Nor was she a mere picture plate, torn from some classic work and only to be gazed at. There was not only intelligence, but a high spirit shining in those dark eyes which gazed so fearlessly into the strangely painted faces about her. I could see that she was not one who was readily the prey of fears, even at the unleashing of some of the sudden terrors of the wilderness, which I own at times have swept me to the borderland of alarm.

It was not until the evil Hook approached, with his hawk-like features and claw hand, and made as if to tear aside the curtains of the vehicle behind her that she drew closer to her aged protector.

‘Enough of this, Hook!’ I called sternly. ‘Why are you always leading these Sioux to new deviltry?’

As the lieutenant and I stepped close beside the

old man and the girl, the Indians fell back, but the trapper only came nearer and said, sneeringly:

‘Always meddling in what is not your own business, Crews! One signal from me, and this camp will be torn to pieces, and I’ll rip the wind-pipe out of your foolish throat with this claw.’

As he spoke, The Hook extended his misshapen hand, thinking to overawe me.

‘Save all your bugaboo work for frightening Indian children, Le Crochet,’ I said. ‘You should tell your cutthroat Oglalas ¹ that the Government is master of the trail now, and they would best go back to their lodges in the North. These soldiers are but the forerunners of many thousands more.’

The Hook’s threatening hand wavered at my bared throat, and then dropped at his side. He had not noticed the soldiers outside the enclosure nor the lieutenant within. Nor had he learned that the Government was now in charge at Fort Laramie, as he had been marauding with the Sioux instead of doing honest trapping as he pretended, and had not been near the post for many weeks.

His momentary hesitation convinced me that the crisis was past, in which I was confirmed when The Hook stepped to one side, after a few hearty curses on my meddling, and called to the sub-chief who was in charge of the party of warriors. There was a conference, in the course of which

¹ The sign of the Oglalas is a hand drawn across the throat.

many glances were directed at the soldiers. Then the Indians were summoned from various parts of the camp, and the warriors and The Hook sprang to the backs of their horses and rode away.

‘Say the word and I’ll have that trapper brought in and put behind good iron,’ said the lieutenant, looking after Le Crochet, who had not failed to pause on a near-by hill and join the Indians in derisive gestures at us. But I shook my head and thereby wrought much trouble for myself, as, with The Hook out of the way, life would have been less difficult for me in the crowded days to come. But who shall know when he weighs so impalpable a thing as his own destiny in his hand?

‘It is rascals like Le Crochet,’ said Baptiste to the lieutenant, ‘who make more trouble than the Indians themselves. *Sacré!* but those tongs of his should come in handy when he passes on and begins his predestined work of forking hot coals.’

Our attention was quickly diverted to the old man and his charge, owing to the voluble thanks showered on us by the patriarch, who informed us that he was from Virginia and that he had taken up the Mormon faith and was traveling to Salt Lake City, where his niece was to be married to one of the members of the new colony — the man who had fled from the wagon-train to the fort in such desperate haste.

‘When we started from Illinois with this party,’

said the old man proudly, 'our carriage was drawn by four blooded horses, but it was not long until all of them were stolen by Indians on the trail. For the last few weeks we have had great difficulty, as these narrow wheels sink into the sand, but I have held out against abandoning the barouche, as it is a family heirloom. Most of our womenfolk have been drawn in it to their weddings, and I would have it serve likewise for my niece.'

I had seen many evidences of such folly, and was in no way surprised at the old man's statement concerning the conveyance. Many emigrants, rather than abandon precious heirlooms, had started for the new West with their wagon-trains loaded with heavy furniture. One by one the pieces had been cast aside, as the difficulties of drawing the wagons had increased, and often I had come upon ornate dressers and carven tables and desks, and even tall clocks which had cost great sums in England or the States — all cast overboard like so much flotsam on the silent, inscrutable sea of sagebrush and sand.

While the old gentleman was continuing his explanations and pouring out his thanks to the lieutenant, I managed to catch a word with the girl. Something in her appealing eyes told me that she wished to speak to me, so, on pretext of examining the barouche more closely, I stepped to her side and said:

'Are you traveling with these people of your own free will?'

She shook her head in negation, and, while pretending to show the coat of arms on the side of the vehicle, said:

‘I am the victim of a kindly but crazed uncle and those who would take advantage of the disabilities due to his age. Save me if you can, but be careful, for there are orders to shoot any one who would help me to escape. But I have resolved upon death rather than to meet the fate that has been mapped out for me.’

Strange sensations passed over my skin, like fires. I felt as if I could spend my life looking into that beautiful face and seeing heaven reflected in those lustrous dark eyes. It was as if the wagons and the plains had vanished, and this girl and myself were on that great belt of ether where only the souls of those who have known true love may travel, and when my voice came to me it was as a voice from a cloud or a mountain top, and I scarce knew it for my own.

‘Listen well,’ said this far voice of mine. ‘I am John Crews, free trapper. I have naught to offer in your service but a tent in the wilderness and some hard-used traps, and a rifle that shoots true. Yet, such as they are, all are yours, and even slighter things may sometimes be kindly instruments of destiny. You have known me only a few minutes, but here in the desert, minutes must be as years in the cataloguing of our friendships. Do you trust me?’

'Yes,' breathed a voice, as if from another cloud or another mountain top. Then the mists dissolved, and there was the hard, dry sod of the prairie under my feet, and wagon tops gleamed about me, and I heard Baptiste and the lieutenant, and caught the note of warning in the girl's voice as she added:

'Be cautious, for my uncle is watching even now, though your friend is engaging him very valiantly in conversation. And especially beware of the man who rode to the fort to give the alarm.'

'No doubt your train will be delayed several days at the fort, in case you are stopping for repairs,' I said. 'There will be opportunity to find speech together. Meantime I can only give thanks for this day that has sent you to me!'

With a few loudly spoken, banal words of praise for the family crest and the barouche, I stepped back, just as the emigrant who had given the alarm swaggered into camp — a much different individual from the terror-stricken man who had ridden for aid.

'That is Abner Blanchard, head of the train,' said the girl. 'He will be angry when he sees me speaking with you.'

Giving me a scowl, the emigrant, a tall, raw-boned, and far from prepossessing young fellow, laid a heavy hand on the girl's shoulder and shoved her toward a covered wagon near by.

'Inside the wagon, Miss Annabel,' he said

roughly. 'And you, old man, refrain from telling everything you know and much that you have dreamed. The Indians are gone, thanks to my alarming the fort, and now we can proceed on our way. We must camp at Fort Laramie to-night and spend a day or two there getting our horses shod and our supplies replenished. Thanks for your timely arrival, lieutenant,' he added, as a clumsy afterthought.

The lieutenant turned away, without a word, and we sought our horses and rode back to the command.

As Baptiste and I fell behind the soldiers on the way back to the fort, my companion rallied me because of my preoccupation.

For answer I turned and looked back at the circle of wagons. From one of them I saw a white handkerchief wave, and Baptiste's eye also caught the signal, for as we rode onward, he sang in a low voice:

'And so you must turn to me at the last —
Of that I am sure, I am sure.'

CHAPTER III

FROM our camp on Laramie Creek we watched the wagon-train move to the fort, a few hours later.

Abner Blanchard was even farther removed from the panic-stricken individual who had fled at the sight of the Sioux war-bonnets than when he had reëntered the emigrant camp. He rode at the head of the train and shouted orders across the ford.

The emigrants crossed the stream with much whooping and splashing. The horses were in none too good condition. It was plain that the poor beasts had been pulling their hearts out in the long stretches of sandy road.

The girl Annabel must have been in one of the covered wagons, for no glimpse of her did I catch, though Baptiste indulged in some ill-timed raillery at my expense because of the close watch I kept.

‘How comes it, John Crews,’ he said, ‘that for weeks you will pay no great attention to the comings and goings of those who splash through the ford, yet this emigrant train, which is little different from hundreds of others that have passed us, you watch as closely as a mountain lion on a tree-limb? In fact, one can get a snarl out of

a mountain lion, but not a word have I had from you this half-hour.'

'Since you ask the question so frankly,' I replied, 'I am interested in yonder barouche. I am tired of traveling in this eternally creaking saddle leather. Why should John Crews not purchase a barouche for visiting his traps?'

'Yes, though any animals that draw such a narrow-wheeled conveyance through these sands should have the strength of bison. We might train a couple of those animals, or a bison and a grizzly bear, to draw us, though I suspect it is not the gay carriage so much as the young lady who is drawn in it that is the real magnet in your case.'

'Whatever the case,' I replied, 'that barouche will never reach Salt Lake on its own wheels. Look what they are doing to it now.'

From where we stood, we could see them in a great pothole over the pretty conveyance. Abner Blanchard and the old gentleman, Annabel's uncle, were directing a group which was entrusted with the important task of wheeling the barouche onto a raft which served to ferry supplies across the stream in high water. With much shouting and struggling, the group finally got the vehicle in such position that it would not roll off the raft, and it was ferried across, where it was unloaded, with precisely as much fuss and exclamation.

The proceedings attracted the attention of most of the Indians camped about the fort. In

fact, as Baptiste remarked, those who did not come were the old people who were too crippled with rheumatism to stir from the lodges of their sons. The Indians lined the river-bank, gravely silent, yet losing not a move that was made. When the barouche was rolled up to the fort, many of the Indians followed it, the squaws and children, and even some of the warriors, touching the hard surface of the paint and exclaiming at its beauty.

Some few of the emigrants turned aside to make camp well above us, up Laramie Creek. Others took the horses and rolling stock to the fort, for the shoeing and general repairs which Abner seemed to think should be forthcoming instantaneously by the blacksmiths and wheelwrights.

Saddling our horses, we rode to the fort and pushed with difficulty through the crowd at the gate. Abner Blanchard was arguing loudly with the clerk, over a question of prices. Many times had I heard the same argument, and always it came out the same way.

‘It’s robbery — downright robbery!’ Abner was shouting. ‘We cannot pay such prices for shoeing, nor for tires. You may as well take our outfit and have done with it.’

‘Pay it, or make room in the compound,’ reiterated the clerk, whose quietness was always in contrast with the heat of those with whom he had such one-sided arguments. ‘It is difficult to

get horseshoes and tires and labor. Tell us how we may get such things more cheaply at an outpost like this, and in return we'll lower your prices.'

It ended as the argument always ended — by Abner agreeing to pay the price. Nor do I doubt that he had plenty, and the argument was simply a matching of one set of wits against another, with the company's man winning. Many times have I stood by with a smile while such debate was going on, watching some shrewd emigrant — no doubt a business leader and dictator in his own community — being forced gradually to the point of payment. At other times had I felt sore at heart, as I had seen worthy individuals, who no doubt were finding this adventure far more costly than they had thought, turn sadly away, and, after a short consultation with their fellows, decide to proceed along the trail without having their equipment bettered. Yet, to the credit of the company let it be said that many times, when it was seen that a command was in truly desperate case, horses would be shod and wagons repaired and the charges placed so low that the work would practically be a gratuity.

Outwardly there was much of harshness in the life of the great trail. Apparently it was a struggle in which the strong showed no mercy toward the weak, yet many times would a despairing emigrant find a firm and friendly hand

extended when least expected, and countless were the deeds of self-sacrifice along that wide and mysterious highway.

'Then this means,' said Blanchard, trying to stifle his rage, 'that we are to be delayed here at least three days.'

'Three days at the very inside,' answered the clerk. 'In fact, you'd better add some to that estimate, as there is a large party just ahead of you, outfitting for Oregon. Their horses are wild and hard to handle. One of our blacksmiths was disabled by a kick yesterday.'

Blanchard smacked knuckles and palm together in unrestrained anger.

'Your business shall suffer for this!' he cried. 'By Heavens, the Mormon Church will establish its own post here, and not another member of the true faith will turn a dollar of trade this way. More than that, the Destroying Angels will be called upon to wreck this place — to leave not one post standing against another and to return these adobe bricks to the dust whence they came!'

Blanchard was in a frenzy, but cooled as suddenly as if a draught of icy water had been flung in his face when the clerk said firmly:

'No more talk of Destroying Angels here, Mr. Blanchard. More such threats, and every wagon of yours shall be rolled out of the compound. It is all as I have told you — we are swamped with work. If you are restive because of the delay here,

you have only to start out on the trail. It is plainly enough marked, so that any one can follow it. But you will meet with far greater delay if you do not have these horses shod and these wagons attended to.'

Without further parley, Blanchard gave order to have the work done, and, bottling the remnant of his wrath, moved sullenly away. While he was talking, I had opportunity of observing the man more closely than in camp. He was tall and loosely put together, yet evidently a man of considerable strength. His hands were large and bony, and his neck long, with a prominent Adam's apple. His eyes were pale blue, and his voice high-pitched and nasal. Yet there must have been some quality of leadership about the man, for he held absolute sway in the emigrant camp, and his dictatorship apparently had not been weakened by his display of excitability at the time of the Indians' visit. As for the old gentleman — Annabel's guardian — he seemed to be completely under Abner's domination.

Blanchard, after a few directions concerning the repairs to be made, rode out of the compound toward the emigrants' camp. No sooner had he disappeared than I heard a hail from the far end of the compound and there saw Baptiste, with the old gentleman and the young girl. Baptiste had seen them enter the fort, and, on pretext of showing them the sights, had managed to keep them

engaged where Blanchard could get no glimpse of them.

The old gentleman shook hands with me warmly as did the girl. It seemed to me that her beauty was even more challenging than when I had seen her in camp — a thing that I did not deem possible. Nor was I the only one attracted by it, for I noticed admiring glances from all parts of the compound — yet glances so frank and honest in their esteem that no maid need have flushed under them. Women have always found true courtesy in the West, and it must be deemed a sad day for the land if ever, in haste of settlement, that high standard shall be lowered.

The old gentleman assured us of his deep gratitude for our arrival at the emigrant camp.

‘Since your departure,’ he said, ‘I have several times assured my niece that I have felt severely my lack of courtesy, but rest assured that it was due to the troublous hours in which we have been living. Scarcely a day since we left Illinois has failed to bring its contribution toward our distress of mind and body, until it seemed as if we must break under the accumulated load. The visit of those savages in war-paint seemed to be the finishing stroke, and some of us had given ourselves up for lost when you put in an appearance. Probably you young men, so at ease in your garb of skins and furs, do not think of yourselves as being in the guise of angels, and yet

it was as such that you appeared to us, I assure you!'

It was plain that the old gentleman's gratitude was heartfelt, and that he really looked upon us as the agencies that had saved his party from annihilation. The sincerity of his thanks, and of the smile of gratitude which his niece gave us, made both Baptiste and myself so uncomfortable that we lost no time in directing the conversation to other channels.

We found that the old gentleman's name was Thomas Drayton, and that he had a business partner who had gone to Great Salt Lake in the first Mormon emigration across the plains and had established himself in the thriving community there. Interested in the stories of the dazzling prospects in the West, Thomas Drayton had sold his effects in Virginia and had started for Salt Lake. Abner Blanchard had been delegated by Drayton's business partner, we afterward found, to guide the party to Salt Lake. Drayton's niece had not known, until it was too late for her to turn back, that she was to marry Blanchard.

Drayton was kindness personified, and his love for his niece was genuine. His mild, rosy face was thinly bearded. His blue eyes blinked in patriarchal friendliness behind his glasses. Yet, as I had noticed before, there is often a strain of stubbornness in such mild persons that accomplishes more harm, for all its slightness than

the adamant in stronger natures. Now that he had turned toward his goal, nothing would satisfy the old gentleman but to see his niece married as he had planned, thereby ensuring his own firm establishment in the colony, as Abner had promised him.

Drayton and his niece were both soon absorbed in the scene in front of them, and indeed I doubt if any one could have looked upon Fort Laramie in that day and not be moved by its contrasts. To get a better view of the compound, we made our way upon a balcony adjoining the partisan's office.

'The puppets are in action — now tell us what you think of our show,' laughed Baptiste, with a gesture inclusive of the scene at our feet.

Indeed, it was a show to stir the pulse of any man, even though he had looked upon it many times. Indians were free to come and go in the compound as they pleased, for at that time there was peace on the prairie. In fact many of the Indian women and children belonged there, as they were the chattels of the white employees of the company — of buffalo hunters, clerks, blacksmiths, carpenters, and wheelwrights. They dwelt mostly in the little one-room barracks which lined the inner wall.

Mingled with such Indians, and with children whose white blood showed in their features, were savages from distant villages on the plain. Many

of these were in war-paint. Feathers fluttered, and there was the constant flash of bronzed arms from beneath brightly colored blankets, as trading was carried on by that silent and universal means of communication, the sign language. Others were voluble enough in trade argument.

The noise made by the smiths could not drown the strange mingling of sounds, atop of which came the constant yelping of the dogs that persisted in straying past the gate. Occasionally there was unusual commotion in some part of the crowd as a fractious horse objected to being shod, and perhaps had to be roped and thrown before the task could be carried out by the swearing blacksmiths.

‘It is overwhelming!’ exclaimed the old gentleman. ‘It seems as if the silent West has at last spoken, through all these Indians and trappers gathered from so many mysterious places. What individual stories they might tell, and how different most of them might be at their own camp-fires! Look at yonder savage, silent and apparently acquiescent here. But, if I should stray into his camp to-morrow, a scant mile from this place of safety, he might strike me dead as a hated alien, and take my scalp. Yet, in spite of the threat behind it all, this scene is fascinating.’

‘There you have found the heart of its lure,’ observed Baptiste. ‘Every man below us has tasted the spice of dangerous adventuring, and

now he will have no other drink. I have some rather indifferent poems on the subject which I shall be pleased to show you at your leisure.'

Observing that Baptiste had shrewdly lighted the fires of bookish interest in the old gentleman's eyes, and making sure that both would be engaged in conversation for some little time, I motioned to the girl, and we stepped out upon the wooden passageway extending about the walls, from which defenders of the fort might pour a fire upon an advancing enemy from any quarter. In a secluded corner of the fort we were shut off from the sights and sounds of the compound and could get an unobstructed view of the Black Hills¹ to the west.

'Do not think me too impetuous,' I said to the girl, when we were out of earshot of the others, 'but it is plain enough to see that we must seize opportunities to talk when they are presented. Are you still determined to leave your camp?'

'Yes,' said the girl firmly. She clenched her little hand as it lay on the stockade, and there was determination in the eyes that looked into mine.

'Then it is as good as done,' I assured her. 'You are familiar with the barking of coyotes?'

'Yes,' she answered, surprised at the abrupt question.

'When you hear a coyote that barks always in

¹ So the Rocky Mountains west of Fort Laramie were then called.

couplets and close to your camp, then you must be prepared to steal toward that sound, if it be possible.'

'I shall not forget,' replied the girl.

'Another thing — do you feel that you are safe in your camp until you reach Salt Lake?'

'I have felt so until recently. At first my uncle's word was law. Abner was subservient to him, but now all is changed. In the last few days Abner has become overbearing and insolent.'

'Perhaps,' I said thoughtfully, 'the best way would be to eliminate this Blanchard right now. It would be easy enough — a word and a quarrel. It has been done before, and either Baptiste or I, in your service —'

She laid her hand on my arm, whereat I was like to have imprisoned her dainty fingers in my own great ones.

'If that be the only way of escape,' she said simply, 'then I must go on to the end of my journey.'

I was ashamed, and told her so.

'It is the frontier that makes life valued so cheaply,' I said. 'Blanchard shall round out his threescore and ten for all of me.'

'I am glad you have said that,' she answered. 'Now I can tell you the rest. The man you called Le Crochet was in our camp not an hour ago, consulting with Abner.'

'The Hook!' I exclaimed.

‘Yes. Their heads were together a long time.’

I was more disturbed at the news than I was willing to let the girl know. In my life on the plains I had noticed that evil leaned toward evil just as readily as in the crowded places. Blanchard and The Hook had recognized some trait in common, and they had drifted together as certainly as though magnetized.

‘That simply means,’ said I finally, ‘that you must be so much the sooner taken from the camp and sent back to your relatives.’

The girl was looking out across the great amphitheater, where the mountains were arrayed, from foothills to peaks, like seats which might have held the gods.

‘I have no relatives to whom I can be sent,’ she said, and her chin quivered at the urge of some haunting sorrow. ‘I have only a younger sister, and she is in a convent.’

‘Then to your friends,’ I blundered on hastily.

‘I have no friends to whom I would be beholden for a living.’

Here was a facer for me! To pledge the rescue of a girl who had neither kith nor kin — what sort of business was that for a youth whose traps and rifle often brought him not enough to supply the needs of his own stomach? Yet I had no second’s thought of turning back.

‘You have never been in those mountains,’ I said, pointing to the peaks toward which the girl’s

sad face was turned. 'They look like a hopeless barrier from here, but if you had traveled in them you would know that there is always a way that opens just ahead, and it is often when the trail seems most effectively blocked that this way is opened.'

The girl smiled her thanks, and then, expressing some fear lest her uncle should discover her absence, she turned back to the balcony over the compound, and I followed. We found Baptiste and the old gentleman back from poetry to the stern but not unpicturesque realities of the present.

'Look over there in the corner,' Baptiste was saying, 'at that young trapper leaning on his gun. That is Tom Tobin, one of the trappers from Taos. He has traveled hundreds of miles through foothills and plains, and dangers have threatened him at every hour of the journey, yet he will turn back as unafraid as he has come. Nor would he exchange such a life for any life of ease that could be offered him.'

'No doubt,' said the patriarch, 'I could look at it with your adventure-loving eyes if I were younger, but the blood is running too slowly in my veins to-day. All I wish now is to get to Salt Lake Colony in safety.'

'That should be easy,' said Baptiste, with a smile 'as long as you are led by such a one as your man Blanchard, who is coming now. His

frown should be sufficient to disperse any warlike red men from the trail.'

Blanchard, in no good humor at the outcome of his argument with the clerk, stamped up the stairs and joined us on the balcony.

'Think of our having to stay longer in this place!' growled Abner. 'The fates seem to be against us on this journey.'

'At least,' mildly suggested the old gentleman, 'we shall have ample protection here in the shadow of the fort, though there seem to be enough savages to overwhelm this small command. Abner, meet these two young men who have already done us good service in coming to our aid when the Sioux entered our camp.'

Blanchard looked at us suspiciously. Plainly he was not inclined toward friendliness for any outsiders who were not of his own kind.

'The soldiers were enough,' he said, 'and if they had been alone probably they would have shot down every Indian, as the marauders deserved, but these trappers are always interfering in behalf of their red friends.'

'And if so much as one Indian had been killed in your camp,' I rejoined, 'a war would have been started which would have closed this trail for months, and your scalp would have been in a Sioux lodge, nicely drying, by this time.'

'Be that as it may,' said Abner, with a self-assurance that would have been more convincing

had we not remembered the picture he made when he rode toward the fort for help, 'we do not want any outside aid, nor are we asking any advice as to our course with the savages.'

There was keen distress in Drayton's face at Abner's retort, but Baptiste laughed heartily.

'By Heaven, but you are right, M'sieu Blanchard!' he exclaimed. 'The happiest man in the West is the one who never would take any advice. I passed his grave at the headwaters of Laramie Creek not three weeks ago — at least so much of the grave as the coyotes had left. If he had taken advice, he would still be in this world of troubles, instead of in such a nice, quiet home. If you esteem happiness above long life, you are taking the right course.'

Abner was about to turn away in anger, when there was a commotion at the gate, and several Sioux dashed in on horseback. I saw that they belonged to the party which had made the trouble in the emigrant camp. Soon they were joined by The Hook.

The jumble of voices beneath us took on a new note. I caught the information that the Sioux had made a great discovery — that an immense herd of buffaloes had been found, not many miles from the fort, headed southward, and plans for a great 'kill' on the succeeding day were already afoot. Indian women and children were shrieking their joy, for buffalo slaughter meant much feasting,

and the men were not less excited because of the prospect of more robes which could be traded to the whiskey-runners who were omnipresent.

Amid the excitement in the compound, I heard the voice of Le Crochet, shouting a challenge in French and repeating it in Sioux and English. As he rode about the enclosure, careless of the Indian children who dived from beneath the feet of his horse, The Hook repeated his challenge in a sing-song voice, and at the same time twirled his rifle in the hand which had given him his name.

‘What does he say?’ queried the girl of Baptiste.

‘He says,’ replied Baptiste, ‘that he challenges any one at the fort to shoot buffaloes to-morrow.’

Then, before I realized what was being done, Baptiste leaned over the rail and shouted to the trapper:

‘We accept the challenge, M’sieu Le Crochet, in behalf of John Crews!’

CHAPTER IV

BALLADE OF FRONTIER DEATH

Ne'er shall my camp-fire gleam, like gold,
Lighting scant breadth of desert sweep;
Dust in my palms this night I hold;
Enough of suns have I seen peep;
Prowling shadows around me creep;
What care I, with my arms outflung?
Sigh not, then, at my crimson sleep —
I saw the West when it was young.

Long this counter, where Youth is sold;
Little the pay that man may keep;
Claws there are, to disturb the mold
That kind hands o'er the dead would heap,
But who declares the wage too cheap —
Complains because of debts hard-wrung?
My trail is there, on plain and steep —
I saw the West when it was young.

Here, no doubt, shall bells be tolled
And herdsman guard the straying sheep,
Where Death and I 'mid cactus rolled
In mad embrace, as steel bit deep;
But let my blood, tempestuous, seep
Into a sod by no plough sprung;
Joyously made was that last leap —
I saw the West when it was young.

ENVOY

Prince, for doomed-to-live then weep,
But ne'er for me have censer swung;
Can years hold more for man to reap?
I saw the West when it was young.

From the Wilderness Songs of BAPTISTE BOUCARD

My sudden embroilment in a buffalo hunt with
Le Crochet, through the apparently impulsive

tongue of Baptiste Boucard, had more of method in it than I had at first suspected.

'Speaking lawyer-fashion, the case is thus-wise,' said Baptiste, after we had journeyed back to camp together, with me in none too good humor. 'Le Crochet is getting too much in the confidence of the Sioux. The Indians are beginning to look up to him as the superior of any of the rest of the white men who come and go at Fort Laramie. As a successful bully, he is winning the admiration of the young Oglalas who are keen for the warpath.'

'Grant that so much is the case, should that be any reason for my being dragged into a test of skill with this despised Hook?' I asked.

'Let that black brow be cleared,' went on Baptiste, in no wise disturbed at my demeanor. 'Here is the logic of the situation: You defeat The Hook in the buffalo drive, and the Sioux will begin to lose interest in him. Thereby his opportunities as a trouble-maker will be so much circumscribed.'

'And suppose, Mr. Lawyer, that The Hook happens to beat me?'

'Then you lose a partner, for never will I travel with you more if you allow that carrion to overcome you in fair test. Only watch him closely for any trickery.'

'I have more than half a mind to let you go on your way alone in any event,' I growled. 'You proceed as merrily making covenants for me as

scribbling your songs. Only I am afraid if I ever did let you go into the wilderness alone that you would gather all verses and no beaver pelts, and would starve to death.'

'If The Hook beats you,' rejoined Baptiste, 'then shall I choose a quick death by drowning, owing to shame and sorrow. But here is another point that may appeal more strongly to you — which point, like a good lawyer, I have left to the last: While you are engaged in this friendly tilt with Le Crochet, I intend to cultivate the older Drayton and see if I cannot prevail upon him to turn back from this journey. I really believe that he can be induced to return. This wild scene to-day at the fort has not given him any too much confidence, and what he will see at the buffalo drive will emphasize the dangers of the wilds into which he is venturing.'

'Now you are talking sensibly,' I said, getting out my bullet mold, and preparing to go over all my firearms thoroughly. 'I'll engage to keep The Hook busy, under such conditions.'

The details of a buffalo drive were familiar enough to me. As hunters at the fort, Baptiste and I had taken part in many such drives, participated in by Crows, Cheyennes, Sioux, Arapahoes, or whatever tribe happened to be in the ascendancy at the mouth of the Laramie.

When any considerable number of buffaloes came within striking distance, it meant a large

supply of fresh meat for the fort. Also it meant new profits for the post in the way of buffalo robes. To the Indians it meant feasting without stint. The tribes were always glad to enlist the services of white hunters, who generally carried superior rifles. In fact most of the Indians were still hunting with bow and arrow.

While the frontier was devoid of any of the means of communication that come with civilization, we were tolerably familiar with what went on at other posts. We knew of the extraordinary deeds of the hunters and trappers at Fort Bent and Fort St. Vrain and the colony of Taos, and they knew not less certainly and quickly of the happenings at our post. As in most things in which men engage, where some skill is required, a strong element of competition had entered into the matter of buffalo slaying. Stories of the deeds of buffalo hunters in the South had come to us at Fort Laramie, and the Indians brought tales of the prowess of some of their own huntsmen in the North. Some of these stories were pure fabrications. Others I knew to be true. Likewise I knew enough of Le Crochet's skill as a hunter to realize that he was not to be despised. Consequently, I had made every preparation with care when Baptiste and I set out the next morning for the scene of the drive.

The fort was being rapidly deserted when we started. The Indian scouts had brought word

that the bison had been discovered far to the north and east. The herd was making its way directly south, in one of those strange migrations, the cause of which none could do more than guess. At its present rate of travel, the herd would cross the Overland Trail by ten o'clock. There were bluffs to the north of the trail which afforded a good vantage-point for the spectators, chiefly squaws and children whose work would come later in dismembering the slain animals.

The emigrants, who had forgotten their fears of a few hours before, were keen for the slaughter. Most of them were riding work-horses, and their handling of their varied supply of firearms was grotesque. Abner Blanchard was the most excited of the lot. He rode with Le Crochet and I heard him making several bets with people from the fort that The Hook would be the winner in the chief affair of the day.

The huge dust-cloud raised by the approaching herd could be seen. Indians, who had forestalled our coming, moved in and out of the edges of the herd, but the sound of guns could not be distinguished above the increasing rumble made by the pounding of many hoofs on the prairie sod.

Many times have I seen bison coming thus, but never has the sight failed to thrill me.

Le Crochet and I, surrounded by excited Indians and white men, heard Bruce Husband's last recounting of the simple rules. Each of us

was to dash into the herd, at a signal, and ride for half a mile, loading and firing one rifle as fast as possible. Thus the test brought out skill in handling firearms as well as accurate shooting.

But there was a thrill other than that of the buffalo hunt, so far as I was concerned. Among those at the edge of the tableland, overlooking the valley through which the buffaloes were to run, I saw the girl of the emigrant train, with her uncle at her side. I lost no time in seeking them out. The amazement of the old gentleman at the spectacle which was unfolding before him was mixed with not a little awe and alarm. It was plain that, as Baptiste had said, the barbaric life into which he had been so suddenly thrust was beginning to play upon the fears which perhaps were natural in one of his age.

There was no fear in Annabel Drayton's eyes, which sparkled as she gazed from beneath her wide, shading hat-brim and began to get the import of the drama soon to be played upon the enormous stage.

'This is man's primeval hunt for food,' I said, reining up beside her, 'only it is enacted on a larger scale. Man used to hunt singly — now he supplies the larder for an entire tribe.'

'It is terrifying, and yet saddening,' said the girl. 'So many of those great animals being killed! How long can it last?'

'Not long,' I replied. 'As the white men come,

the bison will go. The Indians realize it. Some of the medicine men have told me of having seen it written in the clouds.'

The advance line of the herd galloped past us, hardly a quarter of a mile distant. I saw Le Crochet in the crowd at the foot of the slope. The trapper was mounted on a spirited pony, the restiveness of which was in sharp contrast with the quietness of my own mount.

'Are you contesting against that man?' asked the girl.

'Yes. You heard the challenge my young friend accepted for me.'

'He was in our camp last night,' said the girl, speaking in a low, hurried voice. 'He was talking late with Abner, and they were drinking. I am afraid of this Le Crochet, as you call him.'

There was no time for reassuring her, nor was there anything I could have said. I heard Bruce Husband give the signal, down below, and saw Le Crochet dash among the widely scattered creatures that formed the flank of the buffalo herd. Then came the sound of his rifle, as he fired rapidly. Even from where I sat, I could tell that it was good shooting. The sound of cheering came from below.

As I started my horse down the slope, to be ready for my turn, Annabel took from her belt a single, brown-eyed, yellow-leaved flower, of the kind that is so common that I have seen it turn

miles of the prairie golden. I thrust it in the bosom of my hunting-shirt and ever since have I loved the yellow flowers of that kind.

It would be vainglorying for me to tell in detail of what followed. Le Crochet had really beaten himself. I could tell by the roar of his rifle that he was using a weapon of too large a bore. Often had I heard the case debated at the camp-fire, by buffalo hunters of all degrees of experience — the size of the bullet best calculated to bring down a beast so tenacious of life. For myself I had come to the conclusion that a generously rifled barrel of small caliber was the weapon. Shock sufficient to send a ball to a vital spot was necessary. Once sped home, under sufficient muzzle velocity, it made no difference if the bullet were half the size of the great leaden slugs that some of the older weapons threw. A smaller bullet, with more power behind it, and perhaps with a trifle more of accuracy in its placing — such were the items by which I accomplished a victory over Le Crochet.

In Le Crochet's half-mile, he had slain twelve bison with fourteen shots. In the half-mile I had ridden, shooting alternately to the right and left, as the rules prescribed, I had killed sixteen bison with sixteen shots.

'Congratulations on a perfect score, Crews!' roared Husband. 'Your man has met fair enough defeat, Mr. Blanchard.'

'Trick shooting! Pretty enough, but trick shooting,' growled the emigrant. 'Le Crochet's horse was too spirited, and unsteadied his nerves.'

Seeing that The Hook was far from being humbled and that the Sioux were still crowded about him more or less sympathetically, I resolved upon a punishment that should prove more spectacular.

'Oglalas,' I cried, addressing the Indians in their own tongue, 'let Le Crochet, or any other here, follow Iron Hand and bring down so much as a buffalo calf with his bare hands.'

Telling Baptiste to follow closely on horseback, lest I be attacked by a bison while on foot, I tossed my rifle to Husband, and dashed after a well-grown buffalo that was lumbering by at the extreme edge of the herd. The trick that followed I had seen done by a dark-skinned rider who had followed Carson to Taos from California. He had thrown himself from his horse, when going at full speed, and had grasped the horns of a steer and brought the animal to the ground. Only it was much different, flinging one's self at the wide horns of a steer, from taking a flying leap at the small, well-hidden horns of a buffalo. Nor could the rest have been done by a rider of less weight than myself. But I knew, when I felt those horns in my grasp and the powerfully working shoulder beside me, that the trick was as good as done. As my feet struck the ground beside the frightened

buffalo, I threw all my weight downward and back. The buffalo, thrown off its balance, turned a complete somersault, and came down with a crash that broke its spine.

Two other bison, catching sight of me on foot, charged from the edge of the herd, but Baptiste was at my side, and I leaped behind him, and we soon dashed out of danger, leading my riderless horse.

There were shouts of 'Iron Hand! Iron Hand!' from the Sioux at the side of The Hook. They looked inquiringly at him, and, when Le Crochet shook his head, indicating that he would not attempt to duplicate what I had done, some of the Indians even laughed tauntingly. Soon his crowd of followers had dispersed and every Sioux lance and arrow became reddened as the Indians turned to the buffalo slaughter.

Largely for the sake of the Indians about the fort, many of whom were sadly in need of food, I helped in the slaying that followed. It was anything but an appealing task to me. The day was hot, and the dust trembled over the buffalo herd like heavy fog, but I stuck to the task for two or three hours, until finally I ceased to hear anything but widely scattered shots, indicating that the enthusiasm of the hunters was abating. The emigrants, who had thrown themselves into the hunt with such *abandon*, soon withdrew. They had found the game full of unexpected dangers

and difficulties. One inexpert rifleman had even wounded himself in the foot. Several others had been thrown from their horses, and had miraculous escapes from being trampled to death or gored by the great beasts, which will attack a man on foot whereas they may pay little attention to the same man on horseback.

I was glad enough to quit the work because of reasons other than the heat and the dust. It has always seemed to me that the bison is the most nobly independent of all animals, and that the Indians have not exaggerated in ascribing to him many qualities which lift him above the ordinary. I have never partaken in a buffalo hunt that it has not saddened me to see so many of the animals prone in death. For all their size and strength they have proved the most easy of prey, largely through their own admirable qualities. To remain aloof, neither disturbing nor being disturbed, seemed to be all they asked. Yet it was plain to see that wanton slaughter on the part of white settlers would soon deplete the buffalo herds, if not extinguish them altogether. To the credit of the Indian it is to be said that he made use of every buffalo he killed, but I have seen white emigrants slay the animals when neither meat nor hides could be used.

Thinking upon these things I made my way back through the haze. I could see the shadowy form of an occasional buffalo lumbering past.

Once in a while I came upon the bodies of animals that had been slain, the Indians being busy dragging them to one side, where the women could proceed with their unlovely but necessary tasks.

Making my way out of the dust, when I had reached the scene where the hunt began, I climbed to the tableland and galloped along the trail that led toward the fort. Baptiste was waiting for me at our camp on the Laramie. At supper he told me that he had soon dropped out of the buffalo hunt to carry out his intention of talking to Thomas Drayton with a view to dissuading the old gentleman from taking his niece farther on the trip.

'I found him ready enough to listen,' said Baptiste, 'for he has come to the conclusion that life in the West is too clotted with dangers for one of his age. When I pointed out to him the greater dangers that must face a young woman in this country, he was more shaken than ever. And when we arrived at the fort, who should be there but a poor, crazed fellow who had thought to bring his wife out in this wilderness, to live with him at a smithy and small trading-post he intended to set up on the Oregon trail. A few weeks ago Indians killed his wife, as he was warned that they would do. They took part of her beautiful hair. The husband buried her, but other Indians, desirous of possessing so fine a scalp, opened the grave and took the remainder of her hair. The

husband lost his reason and is being taken back to Scott's Bluff now, in charge of soldiers.'

'Such an incident should be sufficient to deter the man if anything will,' I replied, 'and if Drayton alone were to be reckoned with, matters might be easy enough. But Blanchard is not going to give him any opportunity to turn back, if it can be prevented.'

I was soon to have a verification of my view of the situation. At dark I made a visit to the emigrants' camp. The strangers had camped close to the willows that lined Laramie Creek. Above them, on the opposite side of the stream, were some Crow lodges. On the same side of the creek with the emigrants was an encampment of Sioux. Other camps were scattered about the fort everywhere. The barking of dogs, the calling of pony herders, and the shrill laughter of Indian children, who seemed to be always bathing in Laramie Creek, were mingled in one not displeasing sound.

As I made my way cautiously along the creek-bank, the chorus from the different Indian camps was beginning to diminish somewhat. A few dance drums were throbbing in unison, and it seemed as if some great beast lay on the prairie, its pulse beating steadily. A bugle sounded faintly from the fort, and I could hear the sound of hammering, indicating that the blacksmiths were working faithfully in the endeavor to get the various trail parties started on promised time.

Unconsciously I noted each sound, however small. It is thus that the trapper must depend on his hearing when he is pushing into the wilderness. Many times it happened that a slight note of danger, faintly discordant, creeping into the music of the plains, had been the means of saving my life.

I soon saw the huge fire that had been built by the emigrants. Drayton was not in sight, but it seemed to me that there were more men about the camp than I had noticed before — men whose garb was different from that of the emigrants, and who seemed to bear more of the impress of the trail.

Raising the coyote call, and muffling it with my hands so that it would not sound too close and thus set the dogs hunting me out of my hiding-place, I watched for the figure of the girl. Soon I saw her emerge from one of the camp wagons. The men at the fire had not noticed her, and, like a shadow, she flitted into the darkness, guided by the call, which I raised again.

Soon she was standing beside me, in the willows. The beams of light from the camp-fire showed that she was pale, and all the animation which had shone from her eyes at the time of the buffalo hunt had seemingly given way to an expression of fear.

Briefly the girl told me of Baptiste's endeavors to win her uncle to the plan of returning to the East.

'I thought he had succeeded,' she said, 'but when we reached the camp we found some strange, rough-looking men here, talking with Abner and Le Crochet. It seems that they have come from the trail west of here and are confederates whom Abner has been expecting to meet. Abner is suspicious of my uncle, and now insists that, with Le Crochet and the newcomers, we must start to-morrow with such wagons as are available, leaving the rest of the train to follow when the repairs are finished. I feel that my uncle is virtually a prisoner now.'

'Danites!' I exclaimed. 'The rascals who boast that their mission in life is that of the serpent — to bite the heels of their enemy's horses. But, if you are willing to trust us, there may be a way opened up for your escape.'

There was no more than time for a renewal of her assurance of the morning — that any fate was preferable to that into which she was apparently so inexorably being drawn. Blanchard had risen and evidently was looking about the camp for her. There was a whispered word of good-bye, a hurried handclasp, and the girl was gone, as swift and shadow-like as she had come.

CHAPTER V

BAPTISTE BOUCARD and myself piled many an extra log on our camp-fire while we discussed the complications that had been brought into our lives by the arrival of one small and youthful woman in the midst of the West's vastness. A few days ago and we were talking of traps and the weather and such books as had strayed our way, and our lives had seemed amply full. Yet here we were discussing a woman's affairs as if there were naught else beneath this broadest of broad skies.

'It is plain enough that whatever of law has come into this part of the country is favorable to Blanchard,' I said. 'Drayton is the girl's uncle and guardian, and he has come of his own free will so far. We would look foolish going to the fort for relief. If it were Bruce Husband running things, instead of that young lieutenant, matters might be different.'

It was as I had said. The American Fur Company had often found it necessary to take matters pretty strongly into its own hands, and to administer law which was effective even though it may not have conformed to established standards. But, with the abandonment of the post by the company, matters had changed. To be sure, the company's representatives were still there,

but they were merely completing final details of withdrawal to Scott's Bluff, where Bruce Husband had announced that he would continue to trade with the Indians.

There was no wavering in our determination to thwart Blanchard, even though he picked up all the rapsallions on the plains in his aid. At the same time there must be a cautious reckoning of the difficulties to be met.

It was my plan that we should attempt to take the girl to some distant trading-post, where she could be sent back East. It would be of no avail to bring her immediately back to Fort Laramie. Blanchard could follow us, with the girl's uncle, and a few words from Drayton would again put Annabel in Abner's grasp.

'It will be a glorious adventure!' said Baptiste. 'We shall both have a sister to guard for a little time at least. It will be something besides ourselves to watch, even if it is only for the brief time we shall need to get to some post or settlement.'

'But there are matters to be considered first,' I said. 'We are used to traveling with little in our packs, but we cannot expect a girl to live as simply as we.'

'True,' replied Baptiste, instantly downcast. 'I remember seeing a pile of boxes, sufficient to weigh down a Government pack-train, on the wharf at St. Louis, and I was told it all belonged

to some lady who was traveling down the river.'

'But this girl Annabel is no grand lady,' I answered impatiently. 'She seems to be sensible enough, and no doubt she can get along with little. But even at the minimum she must have a horse and saddle and a tent and robes.'

'Splendid!' cried Baptiste. 'Ink and paper, that I may enumerate a list of the lady's wants. What more congenial occupation could there be for a verse-writer? Some Crows came in to-day. They are camped in a draw behind the fort. I saw one Crow girl just finishing the bead-work on a dress of antelope skin to-day. Now that dress —'

'Make out the list as you please,' I interrupted, 'but see to it that, tent and all, it makes no more than one pack-horse can carry comfortably. The pack-horse I will get at the fort, with such common, unpoetical supplies as we shall need to keep body and soul together. Meanwhile, you must make ready to start for a rendezvous this evening, where I intend to meet you with this girl sometime to-morrow.'

'Which means,' said Baptiste in dismay, 'that I am to have no hand in whatever may happen at the emigrants' camp when we call for this young lady?'

'Precisely that,' I said gruffly. 'It is more important that you get a good start with the pack-animals. Pursuit will be so much easier for us to throw off.'

As a matter of fact, I had determined that whatever danger there might be in getting the young woman from the emigrant camp should be faced by myself alone. I think Baptiste knew what was passing in my mind, for he looked at me quizzically a moment and then stepped over and put one hand on my shoulder.

'I think I know why you were made so big, John Crews,' he said, finally, with little half-lights of humor playing in his eyes.

'Why was it?'

'Because your heart was made first, and it was so great that necessarily there had to be a huge frame to house it.'

Whereupon, having embarrassed me to his liking, he returned to his writing, and I rode to the fort thinking on how great a love may grow between men who are thrown much together in the wilds.

At the fort I gave such an order for food and other supplies that the clerk asked:

'Are you and Boucard striking for a distant territory, or are your appetites increasing marvelously of late?'

'It may be a combination of both,' I answered, as pleasantly as I could, though none too well pleased with the clerk's display of curiosity. 'Distant streams always hold the most beaver, and as for appetites, ours have never been known to diminish. Whatever change they make must be an increase.'

‘Surely the increased appetite must be largely yours, Crews,’ put in Bruce Husband. ‘Baptiste Boucard, being a poet, cannot have so base a thing as a growing appetite. As a matter of fact, I’ve known both of you young fellows to start out of here depending solely on your rifles for what you might eat. Civilization must be having a gross effect on you.’

Two buffalo hunters, from Fort Bent, laughed at this sally. I shot them a look which stopped their mirth in its beginnings, and, telling the clerk to have my order ready for the panniers when I called for it, I stalked out, leaving Husband scratching his head at my display of ill-temper.

Early as it was, I found Abner Blanchard and Le Crochet busy in the compound. They were getting out such wagons as had been repaired, and were trying to figure what horses should be left to be shod and what taken.

My pack-horse, which was standing in front of the store while the clerk filled the panniers with what I had ordered, caught Abner’s eye while Le Crochet was busy momentarily outside the compound. Baptiste and I have always taken pride in such horses as we have been compelled to use. The pack-horse was a gentle, yet sturdy animal, so well trained that he scarce needed the Indian hitch about his jaw. Our pack-saddle was of the best, and the whole outfit appealed to Abner, even though he was unused to Western equipment.

‘Here is a good horse,’ said Blanchard, stepping up to the animal, and, in his eagerness, not noticing me in the shade of the porch. ‘What pelt-hunting squaw-man owns him? I’ll pay a good price for the nag.’

It occurred to me that here might be a good opportunity to simplify matters. Blanchard’s words were sufficient provocation for a quarrel. A temporary disabling — a broken arm, or, to make certain of his halting at the post, perhaps a broken leg as well — would be a quick and effective way of solving a situation that promised untold difficulties if once the Mormon train got away from the fort with its precious charge.

I stepped off the porch, out of the shadow, before the clerk could give answer to Blanchard’s question.

‘Things have come to a pretty pass in this freeman’s country,’ I exclaimed, advancing toward Abner, ‘when a man’s horse can be called knock-kneed, spavined, and pack-galled by any corn-husker that chooses to follow the trail out here! The horse is mine, so prepare to take back what you have said about him!’

I had never thought that courage could run so utterly from a man. I must have put more of my intention into my demeanor than into the foolish words I had trumped up, as Blanchard turned white when he saw me stride toward him. Even as I stretched out my hand for his shoulder, he

dived, not away from me nor toward me, but fairly under the horse's belly, and, scrambling to his feet, on the other side of the animal, ran out of the compound calling loudly for Le Crochet.

The clerk and I were left staring at each other — I with my hand outstretched as if to grasp the empty air where Blanchard had stood an instant before, and the clerk with his mouth as widely opened as one of the panniers he was about to fill. I made no effort to follow Abner, who was joined at the gate by The Hook and some of the rough-looking fellows who had come in from the west, and who, I had no doubt, were Danites ready to carry out any devilment that called for force of numbers.

'You'll do well if your trails don't cross,' remarked the clerk, stifling his laughter as he saw that I did not so much as smile at Abner's unexpected antic. 'That outfit is leaving to-day, and if there is any way of revenging himself upon you, that loose-jointed fellow will find it. And if Le Crochet goes with him, there's double cause to beware. The Hook has passed the word that you are to suffer for making a show of him at the buffalo hunt, Mr. Crews.'

Assuring the clerk that threats of revenge did not alarm me, I went with over-elaborate care about the business of adjusting the pack to my satisfaction and then fixing the saddle on my other horse — all the time keeping an eye on

Abner and Le Crochet, who, with their disreputable group, engaged in an extended conference in the far corner of the compound. I could see that I was the subject of their debate, but if they contemplated an attack on me they eventually thought better of it. In the shadow of the store, I could see the partisan, watching closely. Several soldiers were lolling about the fort. In earlier days there had been shedding of blood at the fort, and men had gone unpunished, but it was apparent that those times had gone forever. The law had suddenly appeared where yesterday there had been no law, and a private reckoning was no longer a matter in which a man might lightly engage.

I saw that there was nothing to be apprehended from Blanchard's group. Some of them were even departing from the fort, as their wagons were ready. A glint of sunlight caught the highly polished barouche as the procession started up the first long slope to the west. I saw the white beard of Thomas Drayton, as the old gentleman plodded on horseback behind one of the covered wagons, in which, no doubt, was his niece, as I caught no sight of her in any of the saddles.

When I arrived in camp, Baptiste was absent. It was well toward noon before I heard him singing.

Baptiste brought an extra pack-horse, which, with my own, we figured would be sufficient to

carry the belongings of three persons, even though one of them, being a woman and unused to the outdoors, would require more than the simple effects of wilderness veterans like ourselves.

'Here, in brief, is my estimate of the pack which the new member of our firm requires at our hands,' said Baptiste, paper in hand. 'One tent of small but wonderfully tanned buffalo hide, with Cheyenne designs; two buffalo robes and blankets for bedding and floor covering; table utensils, including some rare silver secured from Bruce Husband and taken by him from emigrants in lieu of needed supplies; one dress, previously mentioned, with fawnskin leggings and beaded moccasins; one rifle of small caliber and exquisite workmanship, found in a camp where everybody had been killed by the Brûlés; one pack-horse.'

'To which should be added one saddle pony, gentle and well-gaited, which I shall get this afternoon from our friend Wolf Bear, chief of the Crows,' I said.

I found that Baptiste had made his purchases wisely. The tent was so small and pliable that we found no great difficulty in adding it to our pack. For ourselves we never took a tent on trapping expeditions, unless it so happened that we were caught in the mountains late in the fall, as usually we could get some sort of shelter from friendly Indians. Our great tent we carried to

the fort, with the extra equipment which we found a need for when we were permanently established at the post on the Laramie.

According to prearrangement, Baptiste departed from Fort Laramie with the pack-horses, headed up Laramie Creek. I was to follow, after concluding my business with Wolf Bear, but, after proceeding a few miles on Baptiste's trail, I was to turn to the right and strike across the prairie toward the great overland highway.

I knew about where the emigrants must camp on their first night out from Fort Laramie. It was just as well, in case they had left any spies at the fort, to let it appear that Baptiste and I had followed the Laramie Creek trail, in a direction that would soon take us miles away from the route followed by the emigrants.

After Baptiste had disappeared, with a final wave of his hand, I sought the camp of the Crows and was soon in the lodge of my chieftain friend, Wolf Bear, pulling alternately with him at his favorite stone pipe.

The chief manifested no surprise at my coming. I knew that in reality he was consumed with curiosity over my affairs, but would die before asking so much as a single question. Finally I said:

‘Wolf Bear, you are a good friend of mine, and have shown your friendship in many ways when I have been trapping in your wonderful country

to the north. I wish to buy a certain saddle pony of you.'

'The horse you desire is yours, at whatever price you please, or without price,' answered the chief.

'It is a saddle pony for a woman,' I said. 'I shall pay a fair price for it.'

The chief looked at me shrewdly from behind a veil of tobacco smoke.

'I hope it is to be for a Crow maiden,' he said, 'though I had supposed that John Crews and his companion were unlike those other white trappers who have taken Indian wives.'

'It is not to be for an Indian maiden,' I said. 'Nor is it to be for my wife, nor for the wife of Baptiste Boucard.'

I was finding it increasingly difficult to explain a situation which had seemed absurdly simple at the start.

'Some of the emigrants who have been camped near you have gone to the west to-day,' I ventured, with brow asweat.

'I saw them go,' said the chief. 'Le Crochet was with them. He is a man of evil.'

'There was a young woman with them,' I went on. 'To-night I am going to try to take that young woman from the emigrant camp, because she is being carried away against her will to marry a man she does not like.'

'And she does like you and you are going to marry her. Good!'

'No, I am not going to marry her.'

'Then it is your brother who is loved.'

The matter was getting increasingly difficult, dealing with one whose ideas were so ingenuous where women were concerned.

'It is for neither of us that she is to be taken from the camp,' I went on. 'We are simply going to send her back to the East, where the Great Father sits.'

'Good!' exclaimed the chief, with disbelief in his eyes.

'I know you do not believe me,' I said earnestly, 'but you must remember that the ways of white men are not the ways of Indians. Everything I have told you is true. I am not carrying off this young woman as an Indian carries a maiden from the camp of his enemies. I want you to help me in another way besides selling me the saddle pony for this young woman.'

The chief nodded for me to go on.

'Le Crochet's party is to camp to-night along the great trail. If I steal the young woman to-night, which nothing but death can prevent me from doing, no doubt Le Crochet will try to follow my trail as soon as the dawn comes. Perhaps the sight of a few Crow war-bonnets would turn him back.'

Wolf Bear smiled grimly.

'I see,' he replied. 'I am to have a war-party to cover your trail. The hearts of the white men are

weak, and they will turn back to the camp when they see our eagle feathers.'

'Yes,' I said. 'There will be no call for bloodshed, or I would not ask this thing.'

Le Crochet's friendship with the Sioux had correspondingly hurt his standing with the Crows. But, more than the satisfaction it would give him to block the move of an enemy, I knew Wolf Bear would welcome a chance to do a friendly turn for me, who had done many for his people.

'Iron Hand will find that the lances of the Crows' are between him and his enemies in the morning,' declared the chief who arose to summon the pony herders that I might pick out the saddle horse I had in mind.

Half an hour later I had shaken hands with my Crow friend and was galloping northward over the prairie, with a spirited little saddle pony led at my horse's heels, and my destination the emigrant trail.

CHAPTER VI

THE sun was disappearing in the mountains as if drawn downward by a magnet, when, from a vantage-point beside the Platte, I saw the emigrant camp where Annabel Drayton was virtually held a prisoner.

After I had come upon the great trail, and had made sure that the emigrant train had passed, I traveled well back in the hills, for I felt that Le Crochet, suspicious of being followed, might take the precaution of posting a rear guard. Whenever I had come to a favorable eminence, I had crawled to the summit to make observation, and at last was rewarded by catching the gleam of wagon-tops and a camp-fire.

Going back to the horses, I caught a rope snugly about the muzzle of the pony which had come from the Crow camp, and, with such danger of betrayal removed, I sat down to wait. I had no fear that my own saddle animal would betray me by calling, no matter how close we might come to the horses in the emigrant camp.

As soon as darkness had settled down, and the small noises and gentle stirrings of the night were in full swing, I led the horses closer to the spot where Le Crochet had elected to make the first stop. As I caught a glimpse of the camp, from

a distance and in the blackness of the night, I could sense the directing hand of The Hook. The huge camp-fire which the emigrants had built on other nights was not in evidence. There was a moderately small blaze in the middle of the wide circle made by the wagons. Also I made certain that there was not so much roosting as had gone on in the camp on Laramie Creek, and I could catch no sound of the almost inevitable fiddle.

Tying the horses under some cottonwoods in a gulch, after I had reached what I considered the limit of safety in approaching the camp, I crawled close enough to distinguish voices and to make out the figures that flitted about the camp-fire.

I was in no hurry, as the emigrants had scarcely more than finished supper. Also, from the friendly sagebrush that sheltered me, as I lay prone, I deemed it best to make a pretty thorough survey of the situation before essaying the next move.

The emigrant camp had been pitched at the very edge of the great trail. Clumps of sagebrush were scattered here and there, and, as I was reminded more than once while crawling, there were occasional clusters of prickly pear and stiff plumes of Spanish bayonet. The river was half a mile distant, where it swept around a bend, in the midst of a heavy growth of cottonwoods.

I was familiar enough with the country, as I had traveled it often, as a guide for parties from

the fort. I had even camped at the very place where the embers of the emigrant camp-fire were now burning.

When the shadow of a man suddenly rose between me and the fire I was not surprised. I had considered it certain that Le Crochet would station sentries. From the fellow's drooping hat and general profile I knew the sentry to be one of the Danites. He yawned and stretched, and then turned his back to me and looked intently toward the camp.

From the sounds which came from about the camp-fire, I judged that a card game had been started. Also it was plain enough that gaming appealed more to the sentry than this tiresome business of watching where there was no movement and listening where there was no sound.

It was while the fellow stood thus that I crept upon him, and, clapping my hand over his mouth and my knee to his back, bore him to the ground with his neck broken. I was in no mood for trifling with plains riffraff. I knew the type to which the man belonged, living by brigandage along the trail and ready enough to do murder for the price of a single beaver pelt. Wolves in my traps had I slain with less compunction.

I found that I had like to have made my leap too soon, for I had no more than rolled the fellow over and made sure that he was dead than I saw an armed man approaching from the camp, and knew it to be The Hook.

Clapping the dead fellow's hat on my head, and thrusting my own hat in the bosom of my hunting-shirt, I prepared to make such issue with Le Crochet as I might, but fortunately his attention was attracted by a louder note in the oath-filled babble at the camp-fire. A sizable row had started and it looked as if there would be rifles cracking without much delay.

Muttering a French oath, Le Crochet turned back to the camp. I heard his voice raised in sharp reprimand, but the squabble went on, and pretty soon two stout figures disengaged themselves from the group and rolled about the space in front of the fire. One of the emigrants, evidently a man of some spirit, had taken exception to the bullying of a member of the group that had come over the westerly trail. A fight had started, and while it was proceeding I worked my way closer to the camp and tried to determine just where Annabel Drayton was in hiding.

The emigrant wagons, being some distance removed from the fire, were pretty well in darkness. There were no lights in them and it was well-nigh impossible to distinguish one canvas top from another.

During a lull in the clatter in the camp enclosure, I sounded the coyote cry which I had told the girl would signal my coming. I had hardly repeated the call when I saw a light glow in one of the wagons.

While I gazed at the wagon-top, hardly knowing whether the light within might not be some trick, I saw the shadow of Annabel upon the canvas. It was her dear profile, held steadily for me to see. I caught the clear-cut lines of brow, nose, mouth, and chin. So had I seen profiles cast upon a sheet, back beyond the great river, in my boyhood days, when there had been a neighborhood merrymaking. I had never thought that so simple a pastime might be the means of saving one whose life I valued far more than my own.

Even as I gazed and felt my heart leap at the shadowy presentment of the sweetest of maids, the light was extinguished and the profile had vanished from the canvas, and the wagon-top was as somber as the rest.

I was now certain that there was no other guard on my side of the camp. A sentry had called out from the other side, all excited concerning the fight, but had been told to go back to his post. The man I had killed evidently had been trusted with the task of guarding the side which I had approached. I made no doubt that a heavier guard was placed at some near-by point on the trail, in the belief that if Baptiste and I were to visit the camp, we would follow the wagon tracks instead of coming by way of the open prairie.

Working my way swiftly through the sagebrush to the side of the wagon, I took my hunting-knife and cut a sizable opening in the canvas,

at the same time whispering to Annabel. I had hardly breathed her name into the darkness of the emigrant wagon before I felt her hand in mine, and in an instant I had lifted her through the opening, and she was standing by my side.

Whispering that she must follow my lead, I dropped to hands and knees and crawled through the sagebrush the way I had come, making sure as I went that she was close behind me. Fortunately, the firelight in the sage cast long, black shadows, through which we crept with little danger of discovery. It was not long until we were far enough from the camp so I deemed it safe to rise, cautiously. Then, seizing the girl in my arms, I ran for the horses.

No distance that I have ever traveled in my plains wanderings has seemed at once so long and so short as those few rods to the gulch in which the saddle animals were tied. I had never carried so precious a burden, nor one which I must set down so quickly. All too soon — and yet none too soon! — I had reached the horses, and that warm clasp was gone from about my neck. In a moment I had the animals free, and, putting the girl astride the pony and leaping into my own saddle, I led the way slowly forth, soon increasing the pace to a gentle trot.

It was fortunate that the void of the prairie at night held no complications for me, as a blacker hour I have seldom seen. There was not more

than a bucketful of stars in the heavens, all told, and every step was like walking off into the seventh pit. There was a confusion of noise at the camp, no doubt owing to the discovery of Annabel's going, but I figured that what was black for me was just as black for even so skilled a trailer as Le Crochet, and I increased our pace no whit until we had traveled half a mile or more. Then I whisked the noose from the muzzle of the Indian pony, and, just as I expected, there was set up a terrific whinnying that would have been comic under other circumstances.

During all this time the girl had said no word, nor had I spoken to her. Indeed, because of the blackness, neither one of us might have been aware of having a companion at hand, save for the movement and breathing of the horses.

Fortunately, after a time there was a trifle more of light on the prairie, as a few more stars hesitatingly joined those that had held the heavens. It was possible to distinguish the light-colored clumps of sage, but I hesitated to travel fast because of the possibility of accident. I could trust the sixth sense of my own horse to save us from plunging into any gully that might seam the smooth face of the prairie. Also, owing to the many long nights I had traveled through hostile Indian country, I had achieved a certain facility in making my way through the darkness, but there were things which none might guard

against, such as a horse's hoof sinking in one of the burrows which prairie dogs and badgers were forever making to the distress of saddle-folk.

As we had traveled from the camp, I had taken care to do considerable twisting and turning at the outset, so that Le Crochet might find it difficult to follow us. Now I was content to travel straightaway in the direction where lay our rendezvous. But, before proceeding farther it suddenly occurred to me to make some inquiry as to the girl's welfare. I knew that she could ride, as on the day of the buffalo hunt she had handled her horse well. Also I had scorned to use the Indian saddle which had been proffered with the Crow pony. Such saddles, in my estimation, are no saddles at all. In its stead, I had backed the pony with a great leathern saddle, the merits of which I had heard Christopher Carson himself extol, and which he said had been designed by one of the California Mexicans attached to the Taos Colony. These saddles were just coming into more general use among the plainsmen, and of their merits much could be written in praise, though their heaviness at first repelled some of those who were used to the flimsy affairs which the Indians made.

Stopping the horses, I brought Annabel's pony alongside mine. To my inquiries the girl answered that the stirrups needed no adjusting and that the easy gait of the pony was a delight.

‘But I would suggest,’ she added hesitatingly, ‘that you give me the reins and let me do my own driving, as it is sufficiently light now for me to see you, and there is no danger of my being lost.’

I had hesitated to speak to her, lest my first word bring hysteria and tears. The coolness with which she gave me answer seemed to take much of the weight from my mind. It was plain that she was a young woman of courage and resource — fit to be numbered among any of those brave women who were facing the dangers and privations of the emigrant trail.

‘You probably figured that you had a helpless school-girl on your hands,’ said Annabel, apparently sensing my thoughts. ‘The more credit to you and your trail brother for assuming such an obligation as I must have appeared to be. No doubt I shall cause you trouble enough, but perhaps not so much as you have feared. I know how to ride and to shoot, and have always been used to tramping about the Virginia woods. Perhaps I shall not prove such a total burden as you have supposed.’

Her tone was confident — almost gay. A weight of care seemed lifted from me. I remounted, and we rode on, this time side by side. As we rode she told me of the events in the emigrants’ camp.

It seemed that Blanchard had been suspicious since he had seen the girl talking to me on the day

of the buffalo hunt. The Hook had seen to it that his suspicions were heightened.

'The climax came,' said Annabel, 'when Abner learned that my uncle had actually discussed with your trail brother the possibility of foregoing the rest of the journey and taking me back East. Abner even went so far as to threaten both my uncle and myself, and ordered a guard thrown about the camp so that neither of us could escape. When we started from Fort Laramie, I was compelled to keep to my covered wagon. I had almost despaired of making my escape, even were I to hear from you, because Abner had placed a young sister of his in the wagon with me, with orders to keep a sharp watch on me. When I heard your signal to-night, fortunately I was alone, as the girl, overcome with curiosity, had disobeyed Abner's instructions far enough to slip out of the wagon to witness the fight that was going on in the camp. I knew you had no means of knowing in what wagon I was held. I could not answer your call without alarming the camp, and it suddenly occurred to me that I might throw my shadow on the canvas. Even then I did not dare let the wagon be illumined too long, as I felt that sharp eyes were always upon me in the camp.'

'It is as I have often observed,' I replied. 'God's Providence works as certainly for man's benefit in the desert as elsewhere. But have you

no fears for your uncle, now that he is alone in the camp? If you have, I can return, after I have left you with Baptiste —'

'No,' interposed the girl. 'He is safe enough. He shrewdly sent some valuables to the Salt Lake Colony ahead of our train. Abner is too greedy to lose any chance of getting those. He will guard my uncle's life jealously enough so long as there is any reward in sight.'

We rode on silently now, at a smooth lope. The night noises of the prairie had ceased almost altogether. No birds called in sleepy alarm from the sagebrush as we rode past. The coyotes and wolves began seeking their dens, and the air from the mountains became chill.

Finally I halted the horses and determined to ride no farther until the sun had risen. The girl made no question, but I knew the thought of pursuit was heavily on her mind.

'I am confident that we are out of all danger for the present,' I explained to her. 'There can be no real pursuit until it is light enough to see our tracks. By that time my friend Wolf Bear, chief of the Crows, will have a band of his warriors between us and any who may follow from the camp. The Crows hate Le Crochet for his friendliness with the Sioux, and he will never dare try to force his way past. You may as well try to catch a little sleep.'

Building a fire of sagebrush, I spread a blanket

on the ground and told the girl to roll up in it and get what sleep she could. Unquestioningly she did as I directed, while I picketed the horses and then kept watch till daybreak.

I had replenished the fire as quietly as I could several times during the night, but Annabel had not stirred. When I aroused her at dawn, with a touch on the shoulder, she sat up quickly. Whilst she partly mended the disarray of her hair, she told me that she had slept fitfully, but felt much rested. I managed to boil a little coffee, and, with some bread from my saddle pockets, we breakfasted tolerably.

The girl was dressed in a riding costume cut like a boy's, only the skirt to the coat being somewhat longer than a youth would be wont to wear. Her boots were of some material that shone like a black mirror, and there was a tiny silver spur at one heel. When she arose, in the gray light, she seemed taller than when I had seen her in woman's garb in the camp. Nor had she worn this boy's apparel on the day of the buffalo hunt, but sat side-saddle, in long skirt, as did most of the Eastern women who essayed to ride.

It was the sight of the masses of black hair tumbling about the girl's shoulders that brought it home to me like a thunder-clap that in all our planning for her welfare we had forgotten to provide for a hat. And here she had fled so hastily from the camp that she had not time to bring

any head-covering whatsoever! As I stood and stared, Heaven knows what thoughts I must have stirred in the girl's mind. Finally I turned once more to our horses and assisted her to mount, meanwhile calling myself fool for my truly masculine short-sightedness.

When we had taken up our pounding across the prairie, the beauties of which were just beginning to unfold in the sunrise — a sight which I shall never tire looking upon, though my years be long enough to carry me into dotage! — I told the girl of the provisions we had made for her comfort and of the great omission which I had just noted.

‘But this miserable partner of mine, Baptiste, shall pay for this!’ I exclaimed. ‘He is a poet, and poets are supposed to know something of women’s dress — at least they write enough on that subject. And yet this wretch forgot utterly that you must have need of a hat to shelter you against the plains winds and the plains sun. Say the word, and I shall wear out the ramrod of this rifle on the back of the absent-minded scribbler!’

Annabel’s clear laughter rang out again and again. The ice of reserve was no longer a barrier. We chatted like school chums as we rode over the trackless hills, sometimes the horses being knee-deep in the yellow flowers similar to the withered one which I was wearing over my heart. If there were savage beasts and even more savage men in

those hills, we cared not in this first real hour of our acquaintanceship. The mountains came out of their mists and smiled at us. The meadow-larks soon had their brightest songs going. The horses loitered and snatched at mouthfuls of buffalo-grass, knowing that we were in no mood to hurry them. Once more I felt that curious sense of detachment — that the real John Crews, setter of traps, slayer of buffaloes, and vagabond of the unpeopled uplands, was taking no part in this scene. This stranger, riding knee to knee with the fairest of maids, and starting her laughter that he might drink it greedily as one long famished, was another personality — the better part of the man which primal conditions of life had crushed and smothered, but had failed to destroy.

Thus it was, in this wonderful, waking dream, that we finally reached the silver-pure stream from the foothills — the stream which was born near the rendezvous where Baptiste awaited our coming. An hour's ride, now single file, between green-clad walls that constantly narrowed, and I caught sight of the little white tent gleaming against the dark background of the pines and pointed it out to the girl.

Then, with eyes as limpid in their purity as I have seen lakes at timber-line, Baptiste came to meet us.

CHAPTER VII

IF this life, in its totality, were such a valuable affair, I have always figured that there would not be so much of it a complete blank in the matter of remembrance. A few incidents are about all that can be called out of the past — the births and deaths, and the glow of some success achieved, or the blow of failure. But for the most part the years seem to be blotted out as they stream along, and each day is important only as we live it.

Even a life on the borderland of adventurous incident is no exception to this merciful rule which makes living merely a synonym for forgetting. With me, the adventures of the trail and saddle have formed just as drab a merging as the routine affairs of the town slave. I might remember that yesterday I had slain a wolf, but in another day it would be forgotten just as surely as your town man would forget having met John Smith two days ago.

But the events that followed our meeting in the canyon can never become a part of those haze-draped corners of my memory which I find are better left undisturbed than submitted to any searching that will only prove vain.

They were days of bright sunshine, made

brighter by the girl Annabel. She had surprised us, on the first morning after her arrival, by emerging from her tent clad in the Indian dress which Baptiste had laid out for her. The afternoon and night she had spent in sleep, as she was exhausted by the preceding events, which I doubt not would have brought utter collapse to one less undaunted of spirit.

She had parted her hair in the middle and let it hang in twin braids, Indian fashion, and, in her prettily decorated dress of fawnskin with fringed leggings and beaded moccasins, she made an even more appealing picture than in the boyish garb in which she had come to us.

Around the camp-fire that morning was held our first conference — a taking of stock and determination as to our future course. The girl took her place in the conference, but not until she had looked her fill at all the glories of Nature which the morning sun had unfolded.

Our camp was in some pines and quaking aspen, surrounding a grassy plot, not ten steps from a swirling pool in the creek, the murmurs of which stream could be heard above and below us. When the sun struck into the canyon, it relieved the scene of any hint of somberness. It was a place in which any man might live and die content. Winter and summer would bring him nothing in the landscape that could fail to soothe his soul. Back of us rose the white hooded peaks of the mountain range.

All about us were friendly hills of green, clustered as if to whisper to us in unison of their charm. The breeze was heavy with the smell of the pine which I have seen relieve the coughing of many a wretched emigrant, apparently doomed to death from the wasting disease that preys upon the lungs.

I doubt if another woman's voice had ever been heard in this place. We had found no trace of any Indian camps as we had pushed into the valley. Nor in the course of all the trapping which Baptiste and I had carried on during previous visits had we seen any indication that the place had ever been visited by red man or white, previous to our coming. Something of this sense of discovery mingled with the joy of glimpsing the scene for its own sake. I had become somewhat dulled to the explorer's thrill, but I knew what flamed in the girl's bosom as she stood, for a full minute, gazing about her. Then we made room for her at the fire-side, and there was coffee and some of Baptiste's not indifferent biscuits and some antelope steak of my own frying — all as a preliminary to our talk.

'This shall be as you say, a business conference,' said Baptiste. 'You and I, the firm of Crews and Boucard, fur-dealers, whose operations include this entire range of Stony Mountains, as our predecessors had it, have taken a partner, one Annabel Drayton, and this is the first meeting of the directorate. We shall imagine that all these

bright rocks and friendly trees are dark furniture, and this lovely arch of sky is a dull ceiling in a money-changers' office in St. Louis. What, then, is the business before the meeting?'

Baptiste's foolery brought a smile from the girl, nor was I ill-disposed toward his light stating of the case, for it served to dispossess Annabel of any fears she may have had as to the danger of our present situation.

'The question of the future welfare and happiness of our new partner seems to be the chief issue,' I said.

'Then let that question be disposed of as quickly and with as little trouble as possible,' broke in the girl.

I caught the note of sincerity in her voice, though she had assumed an air of bantering, to fall in with Baptiste's jest.

'Here is the whole thing, then, as it appears briefly,' I said. 'You have been taken from the immediate peril that confronted you in the emigrants' camp, but there are some difficulties to be considered. There is nothing to be gained by our going back to Fort Laramie now, as I believe we all understand it. There are few wagon-trains going East, and no doubt before you could start, your uncle and Abner would be back with a demand for your surrender, and there would be no recourse but to comply.'

'Also we are most likely to be intercepted by

The Hook and Abner's uncombed cohorts if we head immediately for Fort Laramie. What is there to be said for St. Vrain or perhaps Bent?' asked Baptiste.

'Bent is a far journey. St. Vrain might do. It is not far from here, but travel to and from there and the East is not at all regular. There might be no party going from there, during the entire season, to which we could entrust our new-found partner. Perhaps the only choice is to journey on to Bent, where we surely could find plenty of Eastern-bound traffic along the Arkansas.'

'They say that at Taos Colony there are plenty of women. She might winter there in good company, and Christopher Carson could see to it that in the spring she is sent in a train with ample guard against the Comanches and Kiowas.'

'Or, they tell me there is some civilization at the new town of Pueblo on the Upper Arkansas,' I replied. 'But all those distant places will take time to reach, and then —'

Here I came to a matter of some embarrassment, and turned to Baptiste for help, but found him worse than useless. As I floundered, the girl gave us a question which showed the quickness of her perception.

'If this is a business meeting, and if I am a partner, I assume that I may have a voice in the discussion and that it is not out of place to bring up the matter of money.'

We looked at her questioningly.

‘Is there not some financial necessity entering into this problem of my being returned along the trail, though where I am to go when you send me back, I know not? But I do know that to travel the trail to-day is a matter of some expense, and regretfully I have to assure you that your new partner has come to you without funds. I will have money of my own on coming of age, but until then my uncle controls it.’

Thereupon with considerable hesitation we told her of the misfortunes of the last trapping year which had swept us from plenty to a state where we had little but the good steel and horse-flesh on which we must depend for a new fortune.

‘It was a band of Shoshones, last fall, that brought us to such case,’ said Baptiste. ‘They had pushed far out of their hunting grounds and came on us unexpectedly, with all the bales of pelts which we were taking to Fort Laramie.’

‘If there has been no recent migration of the animals from this stream,’ I said, ‘we should be able to get enough beaver-skins, by a little determined trapping, to send you back over the trail in all the style to which a partner of this firm is entitled.’

‘You see,’ said Baptiste, ‘there is another thing to be considered. Heretofore we have lacked the spur without which there can be no real endeavor. We are men of simple tastes and

few needs. John, here, requires only what may cover his huge frame with clothing and keep it supplied with food, and all I require in addition to those things are pen, ink, and paper. But now that you have come, all is changed, and we shall proceed to build up a real fur company, and lay the proceeds at your feet.'

'Then it shall be a triple partnership,' answered the girl, smilingly, yet in earnest. 'If the fortunes of all of us are to be built from what is to be found in this valley, it can be done only by concentrated effort. It is understood, then, that I shall run the camp while you men give undivided attention to your work.'

The protests which we were inclined to advance proved unavailing. In half an hour the girl had found where we kept all our supplies used in cooking, and had inventoried all we had in stock — a shockingly small amount, as I saw. But, with liberal stretching from the supply of wild game which was at hand in unlimited abundance, I figured that we could make our larder supply our needs for a considerable time without renewal.

Upon further insistence from Annabel, we armed ourselves with our traps and started forth in our quest for beaver. The girl went with us one or two mornings, but soon tired of the work of setting and visiting the traps. Besides, she admitted that killing beaver gave her no pleasure.

Baptiste and I regaled her with many stories of that most sagacious of animals, and repeated Indian legends which we had heard concerning the beaver's attainments. There were numerous side streams within a reasonably close radius of camp where we could plant our traps. One or both of us came back frequently, with game for the table, ostensibly, but in reality to see that no harm had happened to this charge which had been so unexpectedly thrust into our hands. Also we had left the little rifle with the girl, and she had instructions to fire it as an alarm signal in case of need.

As a matter of fact, I felt little fear on account of Indians. We were well below the Sioux country, and the Kiowas and Comanches had ceased coming so far north. The Mountain Utes were well to the south and west of us. Most of the tribes, outside of the Utes, clung to the plains, where the buffaloes ran. Few bison came so far into the foothills. Some small bands had strayed through the canyons, over the passes, and into the great natural parks between the high ranges to the west, but the unnumbered thousands preferred the plains where the snowfall was not so heavy and where they could range for miles without any barriers. So, I figured, we were safe from Indians, unless by chance we had been tracked or unless some wandering party should blunder on our retreat.

If, as Baptiste had said, we lacked a spur for real effort previously, we now had one sufficient to keep us at top endeavor. We were up early, but no matter how soon we arose, the girl was quickly out of her tent and busy with camp-fire tasks, fulfilling her partnership pact.

We soon found how marvelously a woman's hands can change a man's poorly ordered affairs. We had grown careless, in masculine fashion, about our eating, though not so much so as most trappers. But we had not known before what new flavors the right sort of cooking can give even the most simple of foods. Nor had we learned of the real uses which might be made of the needles and thread which we were confessedly the clumsiest of tyros in handling.

Womanlike, our charge made quick provision against our neglect in the matter of a hat. From a beaver-skin she fashioned something which set jauntily and becomingly on her head, though for the most part she was content to go bareheaded, after the manner of the Indian women.

Our discussions at meal-time or in the evening about the camp-fire, had little to do with ourselves. By common consent we kept from that topic, being content that the future should care for itself. Generally the conversation was between Baptiste and the girl, while I lay back and smoked lazily enough and listened to what they had to say of books and songs. Most of all it

pleased me to see the play of expression over both their faces — Baptiste sunbrowned, handsome and earnest, with his hair hanging to the shoulders of his leathern hunting-shirt, and the girl with the shadows from the fire bringing out even more strikingly than daylight the perfection of her features and the gleams that waxed and waned in her eyes, like fairy torches.

And as the two talked thus, it came to me, as never before, how the West must be drawing of the best of the Nation's blood, for Baptiste's later knowledge was picked from such books as he could draw from occasional wagon-trains. Yet in this way had he managed to keep good pace with the world's best thought. Indeed there was seldom a wagon-train without its scholars, and some of the roughest-looking men, I had found, were specialists at home in some form of bookish knowledge.

The only untoward incident in the camp grew in this wise: The glade which we had chosen as our camping-place sloped toward a series of pools, in the largest of which was a huge boulder. In the shade of this rock there were always trout, which Baptiste had shown the girl how to catch. From this pool she had supplied us with many a fish dinner which formed a pleasing variation to a diet which was apt to consist overmuch of meat.

The pool came near being the girl's death, despite the fact that at no place was the water

more than waist-deep. But it appeared that the pool had been the favorite fishing-place of a grizzly bear. The girl was so eager after trout that she did not notice the visitor until she caught the bear's reflection in the water. For an instant they looked at each other, in mutual astonishment. Probably, under ordinary conditions, the bear would have gone its way, as I have seldom known one of the animals to force combat, but in this case it was a mother bear, whose cubs had come to the pool to help in the family fishing, and she would not turn and leave them.

Instead the bear advanced through the water, and the girl fled to the camp, and, snatching up her rifle, fired at the approaching animal. Her bullet inflicted a wound which was not dangerous and which served only to bring out all the fighting spirit of the bear. The girl fled up the stream, where we had gone to visit our traps, but it would have been death for her had it not happened that I was close enough to render some aid.

The sound of the shot had set both Baptiste and myself running for the camp, but I happened to be the closer and came first upon the girl, with the bear so near her that I hesitated to fire. Instead I flung myself between them, hunting-knife in hand. I had often killed the cowardly mountain lion with a knife, and had heard of hunters who had slain grizzlies with no other weapon, but this was my first experience in close

combat with the most dangerous of all the beasts of our West.

As I rushed to close quarters the bear stood erect, and I just managed to avoid a lighting sweep of both fore-paws, which, if they had caught me in their hairy, embracing circle, would have meant instant death. Five years of slaying animals of all kinds, from the largest to the smallest, had given me some knowledge of how and where to strike. There is no animal which will not yield to one shot or one knife blow, rightly placed. I knew when I felt the jar of the knife haft against the solid body of the bear that the animal was as good as dead even as it whirled once more on its hind legs and reached out to crush me. Indeed, the blood from the animal's heart spurted forth with such violence as to cover me from waist to knee, and I looked as if I had received my death wound, when, as a matter of fact, I had not borne so much as a scratch. But the bear had scarcely toppled over when the girl was at my side, exclaiming in horror at the blood which covered me, and asking if I were killed.

'I am almost tempted to say that I am mortally wounded, to get more of such sympathy,' I answered, as I stood with one arm supporting her, and the other hand behind me, with the hunting-knife dripping its blade to the ground.

Just then Baptiste came up swiftly, and saw us standing in the trail, with my arm about the girl,

but the sight of the bear at our feet told him everything, and we fell to reproaching ourselves for not having told the maid that there was some danger of a grizzly's visit to the fishing-pool. She would hear none of our self-reproaching, however, and began marveling at the size of the bear, which indeed was something huge, and rejoicing that the cubs, which we could see among the trees like little shadows, were old enough to shift for themselves.

While the girl and Baptiste returned to the camp, I fell to skinning the bear, as I could not get more of blood over me, and because the wolves and coyotes would have left little of the carcass after one night's picking.

There were other adventures less spiced with danger, for the wild animal life was so numerous that there was some creature to be observed at all times. Wild turkeys rustled in the woods, and great hares leaped through the thickets. Deer and elk there were, past numbering, and an occasional antelope from the plains below. Grouse were busy with their broods, with coyotes forever stalking them, and the wolves ran much at night and were bold enough where carrion was to be had, though not so much so as during the famine pinch of winter.

Baptiste and I took delight in acquainting the girl with the meaning of the sights and sounds of the wilderness, most of which are unintelligible to

the uninitiated. For we figured that we would show her what we could of the life we loved, even though we felt that she would be a part of that life only a brief while longer.

Little did we know that the lessons she was learning were only the beginnings of a sometimes harsh instruction in the ways of the prairie and that we were all to be whirled forth like puppets in a vast theater of action.

CHAPTER VIII

AT Fort Laramie we had been in touch with the changes that were taking place in the relations of the men of many minds and many tongues and varying colors who were making the West the strangest of cauldrons.

We knew of the murmurs of discontent that were running among the Indian tribes. We could sense the far-reaching results of some act that may have seemed trivial to many at the time. We heard of murders that had taken place, and of deeds of self-sacrifice that more than made up for the black marks recorded in the log of the frontier. Tales of villainy or heroism, tidings of war or peace — all were told at Fort Laramie, perhaps in the sing-song of some trapper whose speech sounded strange in his own ears, or mayhap in the sign language of some savage.

Had we been at the fort we might have seen the workings of another act of official stupidity on the part of a Government representative — not the first nor the last instance of the sort. Generally such things were to be charged to the short-sightedness of men at Washington, but in this instance the fault lay with an official who was on Western duty — a lieutenant new to warfare.

It seems that a party of young Oglalas, returning from a buffalo hunt, with no success, had slain a milch cow which had wandered a short distance from an emigrant train. The emigrants complained at the fort, and the lieutenant took soldiers and informed the chief that every one in the Indian camp who had anything to do with killing the cow must be surrendered. The chief replied that practically his whole camp had taken part in eating the cow, and that he did not consider it so serious a matter as to call for such heavy reprisal.

The lieutenant ordered his men drawn up and announced that further refusal would bring a general volley upon the camp, including a shot from a small field-piece which had been dragged along. The chief, disbelieving that any such measure would be taken, persisted in his refusal, and the lieutenant ordered his men to fire. The field-piece could not be discharged, for some reason never explained, but several Indians in the camp fell at the rifle fire. As soon as the remaining warriors could be gathered by the chief, there was a charge and the command was driven back with heavy loss.

Immediately there was a rattling of lodge poles about the fort as the Sioux teepees came down and angry warriors headed for their North country to rally forces and declare a general war. It happened, providentially, that the war was post-

poned, but there was suspicion everywhere on the plains. New terror gripped those on the trail, as stories came in, dealing with mythical hordes of Sioux that were coming out of the North. The Cheyennes and other restless tribes abetted the vengeful Sioux. The killing of trappers increased, as did attacks on lonely ranches and stations, and the frontier bade fair to be pushed eastward instead of westward, leaving Laramie and its flanking forts to be overwhelmed in one final red invasion.

None of these things we had learned, in our retreat among the slim white quaking aspens in the haunt of the beaver. Nor did we know of them until we made the discovery of the scalped man, of which more in its place in this narrative.

The first intimation that we had of any need for breaking the pleasant routine into which our life had settled was when Annabel informed us that nearly all our flour was gone.

Ordinarily such a discovery would have meant little to us, who were used to living for weeks at a time on the toasted kill of our rifles. But, with a woman in camp, all was different.

'There is hardly enough for a week, even with one small baking a day,' said Annabel, as we ate the last of a panful of bread which she had been taught to bake by reflected heat at the edge of the camp-fire.

'Then suppose we abstain,' observed Baptiste,

‘and let us consider all this flour yours, though I do admit, mademoiselle, that I have never been less willing to forswear bread.’

But this she was unwilling to do, and, when I noticed that she was even stinting herself that we might have more, I called Baptiste to conference the next time we started for the traps, and told him that the journey to St. Vrain must be made without delay.

It was determined that I should stay in camp with the girl and proceed with the trapping, while Baptiste went to the post with sufficient of our furs to secure what supplies we might need to complete the season where we were. By that time we should have enough, we figured, to face whatever hazard arose concerning the welfare of the girl.

Baptiste started the next morning, with saddle horse and pack-animal, and as he waved good-bye to us we heard his voice raised in a song of the trail.

After we had seen him go, to adventuring of his own, we turned back, to find that which, had its presence become known, would have turned every white-hooded wagon our way from both the great trails.

In my trapping, on countless streams, of all sizes and at many altitudes, occasionally I had looked for gold, but never had I come across any sign of it. I had seen men who were skilled at

gold-hunting, panning fruitlessly in the sands, while we of the traps took a wealth of pelts from the same streams. Men had talked, at lone campfires and at trappers' rendezvous, of the certainty of gold being somewhere in that great stony range. There had been many tales of Indians who wore golden ornaments, hammered from nuggets taken from these Western hills, and of others who had brought in fine gold, in eagles' quills.

Regarding these stories there was neither belief nor disbelief, so far as I was concerned. The lust for gold-hunting simply was not in my composition. Men could thrill me with tales of rafts of beaver pelts floated down the Yellowstone and the Missouri, under a rain of arrows from savage foemen. But the thought of gold had never clutched me at heart and throat until this maid in our camp opened her pink palm and showed me a cluster of nuggets, which, in her play, she had scooped from the sandy bed of our friendly stream.

The matter came about in this wise: (In faith I have gone over it so many times in my mind that I know it backward!) When we returned to the camp after parting with Baptiste, I could see that the girl was somewhat disheartened. I could understand her state of mind, for the going of that lad of cheer had never failed to affect me just so. It was as if a passing cloud had shadowed

the camp, and it was always necessary for me to busy myself more diligently than usual to restore something like my customary balance of good spirits.

‘It strikes me that this camp is not altogether the cheerful place it was an hour ago,’ I said, on our return. ‘Suppose you come with me upstream for company?’

She was glad enough, I could see by the change in her expression, and we chatted of things past and present as we traveled through the alternate stretches of sunshine and shade, toward one of the upper meadows where there were beaver dams and Baptiste and I had set many traps.

Most of all, as we walked, I liked the sudden playing of sunlight full in her face as we stepped out of some glade, for it was then that there appeared an adorable little pucker in her forehead, which gave her an air of wistfulness, the charm of which I have never seen duplicated in any other woman’s features.

When we had come to a point below the beaver dams, she elected to stay while I went on and attended to the little work that was to be done.

‘If you will cut me a branch with a suitable swing to it,’ she said, ‘I will try fishing here, as the water is shallow, and there is a good pool near yonder rock.’

Then she brought out a line, and some winged hooks which the clever Baptiste had made for

her. In a few minutes I left her tying the line to the long switch that I had cut.

I was not long at the traps, and as I neared the fishing place, I called to the girl. I heard her voice, in some excitement, telling me to hurry, and I found her, barelegged, and with sleeves rolled to her shoulders, just wading out of the stream with something of exceeding interest held in her joined palms. It was then, as I looked into her hands, that I saw the gold.

While I turned the nuggets over, one by one, with my great forefinger, she looked into her hands, fascinated, and told me what had happened. She had waited until I had gone and had taken off her moccasins and leggings, as she had often done when alone in camp, and had waded well into the enticing trout pool. Not getting a rise from the fish, she had tossed her rod to the bank, and then had amused herself by wading the length of an extended, sandy bar. Sitting on a small boulder she had dabbled her feet in the water as a child might have done, and then she had rolled up her sleeves and scooped up the sand and, tossing it back in the stream, had watched it disintegrate and slowly disappear.

Something in the sand had attracted her attention. Perhaps one of the flashing ouzels from the waterfall not far above, had brought her some message. At any rate, she had looked and had discovered gold. Putting her hand slowly beneath

the surface, she had allowed the water to wash away the encompassing sands, and the nuggets had stood forth alone. It was then that she had called me, forgetting leggings and moccasins and all else but the fact that here was fortune.

Wading out to where the girl had stood, for I was already dripping from my work at the traps, I scooped up great handfuls of the sand, and let the water winnow out the smaller particles. Every time the result was the same — a little group of those irregular, dull yellow nuggets. I estimated the length and depth of the sandbar. If there were not another ounce of gold in the stream, that deposit alone would mean wealth for an entire community as large as the one we had left at Fort Laramie.

Returning to camp, I took two frying-pans, and then proceeded to demonstrate, past all doubt, that the girl's discovery was no mere pocket of gold.

I scooped panfuls of sand from every part of the bar. Those I deposited at the edge of the stream, until a considerable pile had been accumulated.

'This represents a fair sampling of the entire bar,' I said, finally, as I desisted from my work. 'Now let us find the average return.'

I showed the girl how the panfuls of sand might be quickly reduced to their final content of gravel and gold, by giving a swirling motion which

carried the lighter particles over the edge. Then we fell to our task, the silence being broken only by one of us as an occasional panful showed unusually rich deposits of nuggets among the heavier bits of gravel.

We worked thus, without dinner, and it was not until my attention was attracted by the chill of evening and the sudden deepening of shadows that I started up from my crouching posture and told the girl that we must get back to camp.

Nor had I realized how thoroughly this lust of the gold chase had possessed me. My voice croaked harshly as I spoke to the girl. For the first time I realized how patiently and silently she had been working at my side, in water so cold that her hands and wrists must have been quite numbed.

Something of the gold madness must have shown in my face, for, as her answering gaze met mine when I had straightened up and had come out of my dream, there was sadness in her eyes and in the smile which she tried vainly to make bright.

Dazedly I brought my hand across my brow. Never had I been through an experience so strange. Now I realized for the first time why men forgot honor, faith, and even love, in this search for hidden riches. It was only the girl's presence that brought me back. Shame took possession of me, and, on the way home, I vowed inwardly that

even if the mother lode itself were uncovered in that yellow sandbar, it should not bring back that look of sorrow to the eyes of my companion.

To our amazement, on reaching camp, we saw the gleam of a fire, and heard the voice of Baptiste, raised alternately in song and scolding.

‘What new form of thief do you suppose has been developed among our animal friends?’ he called to us. ‘Here are our frying-pans gone completely, and your cook with a good fire burning and plenty of antelope steak ready and no iron at hand.’

‘Here they are, only insult them no more by calling them frying-pans,’ answered the girl. ‘They are gold pans, and here you have their first proceeds.’

We clustered about the fire as Baptiste opened the buckskin sack in which I had carried tobacco, but which now was well filled with nuggets. And, as he looked in amazement, we told him of the discovery Annabel had made, and of our work of the afternoon.

‘The first dividend of our partnership!’ cried Baptiste, ‘and, *nom de Dieu!* a pretty dividend indeed. Our junior member has brought luck as well as beauty to our firm.’

I was watching Baptiste narrowly, and saw that under his cheerful exterior he was ill at ease and evidently had something of grave import that he would tell me and yet keep from the girl.

So I forbore asking him why he had returned so suddenly, and, as for Annabel, she was so trusting in her complete acceptance of our guardianship that never at any time did she advance a query as to the reasons for any action that might be taken.

As soon as he could get me alone, which was not until the girl had retired to her tent for the night, Baptiste told me of the scalped man.

‘As soon as I reached the plains, after leaving you,’ said Baptiste, ‘I traveled cautiously, yet as swiftly as possible. I kept to the lowlands as much as I could, even though I had to make many detours to avoid crossing hills. It was a pleasant enough day, out there, and I was making good progress and was just telling myself how soon I should be at the post, and how quickly I should be setting back with the flour and all else we had figured that we needed in camp, when I saw a man rise up on a ridge and then fall again, and I knew that some devil-work had been going on in all that bright sunshine.

‘I lost no time in getting to the man, as I knew it was no Indian ruse that was being put forth for my acceptance. *Sacré!* but it was far from a pretty sight that I saw. The man had been scalped and left alive. He had strength enough to tell me that he was a trapper, just starting forth alone, with a sizable outfit, for La Ramée’s hills, and that he had been set upon by a party of Sioux, as he supposed, and captured. Only, after

he had been caught, he found that they were white men disguised as Indians, and their leader was one with a deformed right hand.'

'Le Crochet!'

'The same. And Le Crochet's marks were on this poor wretch in plenty. I had no doubt that Abner was in the band, but the trapper was too far gone to tell me more, outside of his name and where I might write to his kin. He had been dying as he struggled across the prairie. Occasionally he would rise to his feet and walk a few steps and then fall. It was the last of those efforts that caught my attention. He soon became unconscious and died. It was hard to leave him without burial, but there was nothing else to be done.'

'You did well to turn back,' I said. 'No doubt you would have been intercepted before you reached the fort. Le Crochet has surmised that we will be headed for the St. Vrain post, and, having been unable to track us, he is hoping to throw himself in our way.'

'But the danger is not altogether from Le Crochet,' went on Baptiste. 'The plains are fairly afire with rumors of Indian war.'

And then he told me what he had learned in a few words from the scalped man, regarding the outflare of passion that had followed the gross mistake of our young lieutenant at Fort Laramie.

It was disturbing enough to know that Le

Crochet and Abner and their cutthroats were within striking distance, but this knowledge that any Indian band which we might meet on the plains, outside of the always friendly Crows, was to be regarded as a menace to our safety, was indeed disturbing.

We returned moodily to our blankets. No one, to observe our demeanor, would have taken us to be men to whom had come a day of golden fortune. But we knew full well the dangers of life on that vast prairie, whose bosom hid so many secrets of good and evil. It was not for ourselves that we spent most of the night in wakefulness. We should have been happily content to take our chance of threading our way, through Sioux and Cheyenne and white renegade, to the post. If fate had been against us, then could we die fighting, as many a trapper had died, behind a breastwork of horseflesh.

But the girl, who had come into our lives like a song, was above and beyond all the care-free planning that we had known hitherto. Her life was not to be gambled with, as we had gambled with ours.

It was not until we had both gone through those dark and sleepless hours, beside the stream of gold, that we realized how precious had this emigrant maid become!

CHAPTER IX

AT breakfast time the next morning we told the girl that a move toward the St. Vrain post seemed to be the most feasible thing to be undertaken.

She listened calmly enough when we told her that Baptiste had turned back because of the discovery that Le Crochet was near.

'I knew something serious had arisen,' she said, 'but it was not for me to ask questions. Only, now that you have told me, my one request is that you assume no risks on my account. You have risked your lives far enough in my behalf. Let me go back to Abner's camp, rather than endanger you any more.'

The earnestness of the girl's voice, and the expression of her sad, uplifted face, brought the tears to the eyes of both of us, and for a moment not even Baptiste, the ready of tongue, could make reply. When at last he spoke, it was in a voice none too steady.

'Little partner,' he said, 'before you came, death was a matter of indifference to us, so many times and in so many forms had we seen it staring in our faces. But now we would deem it a matter of joy to die in your service.'

The girl covered her face with her hands, and

for the first time since she had been with us, we saw her weep.

Never have I spent a more uncomfortable moment, with new emotions tugging at me like so many wolves that had popped out of nowhere. As I raised my great arm to brush away a fog that never before had been in my eyes, my hand struck a weighty parcel in my pocket, and I cried out:

‘Besides, have you not made us all rich — and what harm can befall these men of wealth, whose precious skins you have been worrying so needlessly about? Here is the ransom of twenty men like Baptiste and myself.’

So saying I held up the pouchful of nuggets which I had forgotten, so worthless a thing does gold become in crises where men are flung on their own resources. And yet it had come to me that perhaps this sagging bag of leather, smelling so vilely of tobacco as it did, might be of some use before our adventure had come to an end.

The very incongruity of my words had brought a smile, and, in some better spirits, though still protesting that we were to run no extra hazards on her account, the girl Annabel began helping us in the process of camp moving. Not that there was much that she could do, for transferring the scattered articles of a camp to an orderly pack, tightly fastened to the back of a none too patient animal, calls for a certain specialized knowledge

and skill and strength which can come only to men who have lived cheek by jowl with the primeval.

For the beaver pack we made a *cache*, and hid the pelts well. There was no room on the pack-animals when once we had our camp equipment bestowed. It was a question of getting ourselves through to safety, with no thought of worldly possessions. Our camp equipment I figured it necessary to take, for we might be forced back into the foothills for an indefinite time. In case of desperate need, the packs could be abandoned at any hour.

'*Adieu*, my beautiful beaver-skins,' said Baptiste, mockingly, as we closed the *cache*. 'No more shall I say *au revoir*, to such as you, in the fond belief that some day I shall come back and claim you. I have enough beaver-pelts hidden between this and the Yellowstone to make hats for all the dandies of New York and London, but never a one do I ever expect to be able to dig up.'

Then, to the amused interest of the girl, Baptiste launched into a vigorous recital of some of our sad experiences in trapping, when we had found it necessary to abandon the harvest of our steel just when affluence seemed to be ours.

We rode single file down the canyon and into the wide valley, oftentimes through trees so close together that there was a constant scraping of branches over the top of our pack.

Soon we came out where valley and plain merged, with our horses headed southward along the great plateau. I have found it a common impression among those who know little of the plains country, save what they may have secured from hasty glances from an emigrant train, or perhaps from reading descriptive letters from friends or relatives who have hazarded the Western journey, that the land is actually flat, with little or no opportunity for a moving object to escape the vision. As a matter of fact I have found the plains everywhere to be full of variety of contour. The traveler, on penetrating what appears to be flat, unbroken country, will find the land full of unexpected depressions. There will be wide swales and narrow gulches, and even small streams, where, at first glance, there appeared to be only the level prairie.

It is their wonderful knowledge of these natural advantages that has enabled the Indians to perform feats in scouting which have amazed the most skilled of military tacticians. When the trappers penetrated hostile Indian country, they found it necessary to adopt the red man's tactics. They knew that, somewhere in the apparently deserted plain, there might always be foemen concealed. It behooved the trappers, therefore, to practice like concealment. It was by taking advantage of conditions in topography that Baptiste and myself had often escaped from apparently hopeless entanglements.

It was by like methods that I was now hoping to reach the St. Vrain post, but such hopes were dashed, when, from my position in the lead, I saw a horseman standing atop of a hill, no more than an easy rifle-shot distant.

I had climbed toward the top of a knoll to do a little reconnoitering, and had no more than thrust my head over the crown of the hill than I saw that all further progress was halted.

Baptiste was soon at my side, and, as he drew back after one glance over the knoll-top, exclaimed:

‘Le Crochet!’

Then he brought up his rifle, and would have dropped The Hook out of the saddle where he was sitting so lazily, for a better shot than Baptiste there was not on the plains. But I stopped him and whispered:

‘There is a surer way out.’

Then we brought up the girl and the horses, close under the brow of the knoll, and, after a few directions to Baptiste regarding the things to be done in case my plans went wrong, I climbed into the saddle and rode out toward The Hook, raising my hand palm outward and calling to him that I wished to parley.

Though The Hook must have been astonished to see me rise out of the ground like an apparition, he did not change his attitude one whit, but sat there, still lazily, with his elbow on his saddle

horn and his chin on his hand. Only there came over his face that malignant smile which I swore inwardly that one day I would wipe permanently from his features, and he raised a call that brought other horsemen to his side.

I could see that all were painted and feathered like Sioux. Abner was among them, rigged up like the rest, and the rage in me was great as I thought of the crimes that had been committed by bands like these. Also it came to me that perhaps Abner was no Mormon at all, but one employed to lead any of the guileless into the clutches of these freebooters, who were picking an easy living from the great trail.

The Hook and Abner rode out to meet me. I made them halt, a few paces distant from me, well down the slope of the hill. The others, some eight or ten in number, had gathered at the bottom of the hill, ready to shoot as soon as the expected signal was given.

Abner was both jubilant and abusive, but Le Crochet cut short the epithets that were being hurled at me.

'Save all this breath of yours, Blanchard,' growled the trapper. 'Let us hear what there is to be said.'

'Spoken sensibly enough, Le Crochet,' I answered. 'A little parley may mean wealth for all of you. So far as this girl is concerned, let your comrade stop his bleating. She is safe enough, at

the top of this knoll, under Boucard's rifle. If you try to capture us, we can kill a few of you, and probably you will only kill the young woman, whereas if you listen to what I say there will be no bloodshed and much greater gain for you.'

'Go on, then,' said The Hook, snatching Abner's rifle from his hands and threatening Blanchard with the weapon. 'If this fool keeps up his chatter, I'll tear out his tongue.'

It was plain enough that the command in Blanchard's camp was no longer in Abner's hands. Abner quailed before The Hook's fierce gaze. One or two of the men at the bottom of the hill, much interested in what was going on, made their way quietly up the slope and joined Blanchard and The Hook. I kept a watchful eye on the rest and saw that none of them attempted to skirt the base of the hill for a possible attack on Baptiste from the other side.

'Now follow what I am doing and what I have to say, Le Crochet,' I said, 'because, as I tell you, it means fortune for you — not the kind of reward you get from knocking defenseless emigrants on the head, but the sort that gives you good, clean, yellow gold and plenty of it.'

Avarice lighted The Hook's fierce features. Even Abner forgot something of his rage, and watched interestedly as I dismounted, and spreading a saddle blanket on the ground, poured into it some of the contents of my tobacco pouch. Then I remounted and rode back a short distance.

‘Take a look,’ I said, ‘and then listen to the conditions on which I will lead you to a place where the sands are thick with nuggets like these.’

In an instant The Hook had spurred up beside the blanket and was out of the saddle and on his knees beside the gold. Then came Abner, and soon the whole crowd, with their bodies crudely smeared with red, making them look like masqueraders, were grouped about the blanket, and there were oaths and exclamations of wonder as the nuggets were passed from hand to hand and found to be genuine.

‘You say there is plenty of gold like this in the place you have found?’ said Le Crochet, the largest nuggets in his hand and his evil face set like the face of a man in a dream.

‘This pouch was filled from a few panfuls, hastily scooped. One sandbar had enough to make you rich, every man of you.’

‘I once heard a long-robed missionary telling of such a place,’ said Le Crochet, ‘and I wished I had him where I might have stripped the soles from his feet and made him tell.’

‘Probably all your inventive genius in the way of torture would have gone for naught, as it would in my case,’ I replied. ‘You know you cannot drag this from me, or from Baptiste, by force. Yet here is a chance to get all this wealth without effort, if you will only come to my terms.’

‘What are the terms?’ croaked The Hook, his

distorted fingers pawing over the nuggets clustered in his left palm.

‘Safe conduct for all of us to St. Vrain.’

‘And then?’

‘Then I will come and guide you to the scene of this gold discovery.’

Blanchard set up a loud protest. The emigrant had examined the gold as greedily as any in the party, but when he heard the conditions which meant that Annabel was to be lost to him, he swore that nothing of the sort should be bargained for.

‘It’s the girl we’ve been looking for all these days, and the girl I intend to have,’ he insisted. ‘Who knows that this buffalo-hunter is not lying? He may have stolen the gold from some honest miner.’

Le Crochet sneered.

‘You have lived where there are plenty of men,’ he said, ‘and yet you know little enough about them. Some day I’ll rip out this big trapper’s eyes, but not because he’s lied to me. I’ll take his word once to yours twenty times.’

Thereupon a chorus of disagreement arose from those who were grouped around the blanket. Some were following the lead of Abner, and others sided with The Hook. All were eager for the gold, but a few could not believe The Hook when he said that my word was to be taken, no matter under what conditions it had come to be passed.

I smiled as I listened to the rise and fall of the harsh voices, for I knew that The Hook would win in the end. Indeed, there was nothing else for them to do except come to my terms, for, as I had said, any attempt to capture us outright would probably have resulted in the death of Annabel. As for wringing the gold secret from Baptiste or myself by torture, The Hook knew it could not be done. He did know that I would stand by my agreement, in case we were given safe conduct to the fort. And he was concerned little over any unhappiness that might come to Abner because of the loss of the emigrant maid. The gold lust was in the veins of all, and I knew that, in a few words, The Hook would bring every man with the exception of Abner to the acceptance of my conditions.

I had backed my horse, step by step, closer to the brow of the hill, in case there should be an unlooked-for rushing of our position. I caught a rustling behind me, and here was the girl at my side, pleading with me to undo the contract I had made with The Hook. She had slipped away from Baptiste, who, with rifle in position, stood at the crest of the hill ready to fire if any rush were made toward us.

Clinging to my hand, and with the tears glistening on her upturned cheeks, the girl renewed the plea that she had made in camp.

‘This means that you are giving your life to en-

sure our safety,' she declared. 'As soon as you have shown these men where the gold is to be found, they will kill you.'

I was silent, for I knew that she spoke the truth.

'There must be no more sacrifice on my behalf,' she said. 'Let me give myself up now, which I shall do if they will ensure your passport to the fort.'

For fear that she might do some such deed of rashness, on the moment's impulse, I stooped and lifted her to my side, holding her firmly against me. Her lithe young body was passive in the clasp of my arm.

'You will be doing no good by giving yourself up,' I said, as I wheeled my horse and carried her back to Baptiste at the hilltop. 'It is better that two of us get through in safety than to have all of us lost. Besides, there is no hardship in dying for one's friends.'

The girl sank to the ground beside Baptiste, and I felt that she had been convinced of the futility of any personal sacrifice on her part.

Our enemies had made no hostile move toward us. They were still arguing matters, but I could tell that The Hook, either by logic or inspiring fear, had about silenced those who had been inclined to side with Abner.

Finally The Hook waved to me, and I rode cautiously forth.

'We agree to your plan,' called Le Crochet, and Abner, at his side, nodded a sullen acquiescence.

'Then stay where you are,' I said, 'until we skirt this hill and get on the other side of you. When the others in my party are safely within the fort, I will show you where this gold is to be found.'

As we swung down the slope of the hill, toward the fort, I caught sight of a line of fluttering war-bonnets disappearing into a near-by swale.

Brief as the glimpse had been, it had offered me time for cataloguing.

'Crows!' I said to Baptiste, who nodded in agreement.

Losing no time in getting to the top of the nearest hill, we stood expectantly. In a few minutes that line of eagle feathers appeared once more and again disappeared — only this time much closer. The drumming of hoofs on the hard soil of the prairie was heard, and then, from the hollow where we had left Le Crochet and Abner and their fellow still examining the gold, there came the sound of shots, and Indian cries of battle.

Horsemen, widely scattered, dashed over the prairie. Some fell before the arrows and lances of pursuing warriors. Others, being better mounted, made their escape. Perhaps all would have been

slain, but the Crows evidently were not disposed to press their advantage.

'What are we to do?' the girl said, at my side. 'The Indians cannot be bargained with.'

'No need for bargaining,' I said reassuringly. 'These are our friends.'

'But,' said Baptiste, 'they act as if in a hurry. It may be that there is another war-party on their trail.'

Confirmation of Baptiste's surmise was soon brought by a dozen bonneted warriors, under Wolf Bear himself, who informed us that they were fleeing north, ahead of a considerable war-party of Sioux. They had caught sight of the Sioux headdresses on the white men, and had thought Le Crochet's party to be a scouting detachment from the main party. Six of the white men had been killed. Le Crochet and Abner, we made certain, had escaped.

'The Crows never knowingly shed white blood,' said Wolf Bear, 'but if these men have cast their lot with the Sioux, we cannot be blamed for killing them.'

Here a sub-chief declared that he would rather have killed Le Crochet than to have taken twenty Sioux scalps, and the chorus of assent that went up showed how The Hook was hated in the camps of the Oglalas' enemies.

'You are my friends,' said Wolf Bear, to Baptiste and myself, 'and the maiden you took from

the emigrant camp, and whose trail we covered, when Le Crochet would have followed you the next day, will be welcomed as one of our own maidens in the camps of the Crows. You cannot reach the fort now, as the Sioux are between you and St. Vrain. Turn north with us, and if it be possible to reach Fort Laramie, you shall be left there.'

This speech in the Crow tongue, I translated swiftly to the girl. Meantime Baptiste was stripping our packs from the horses, for our escape now was a matter of speed.

Soon there was a concerted down-swinging of the wooden-handled quirts which all Indians use so unsparingly, and we were riding in the midst of those fluttering war-bonnets, with the pounding of hoofs and the songs of the warriors in our ears, and the oncoming Sioux like a distant dust-cloud in the south.

CHAPTER X

THE PLAINS OF LARAMIE

The Laramie plains, they stretch afar, to eye of setting sun,
And wondrous are those table lands, all clothed alike in dun,
And silence brooded here long years ere man's life was begun.

The Laramie plains, they melt away, like some vast, open sea;
The winds that sweep across their wastes ne'er meet a staying
tree,
And not a mile but has its hints of olden mystery.

Here sunrise is a cloth of gold — noon is a fantasy —
And fortunate the wanderer whose roving eye shall see
The glories of a sunset on the plains of Laramie.

From the Wilderness Songs of BAPTISTE BOUCARD

MORE than once during the ride that followed I looked at Annabel Drayton and wondered what was passing in her mind.

A few weeks ago she had been surrounded by the refinements of civilization and was living a quiet, well-ordered life, such as comes to any young woman who is brought up amid good circumstances. Yet here she was, in the center of a group of painted savages, riding to escape others who were still more savage. All around us, as I rode at her side, were the fluttering headdresses of half-naked warriors, whose ponies seemed to revel in the excitements of the hour even more than their masters.

The scene was not one that would have ap-

pealed to me as unusual, under other conditions. I had lived so constantly amid the alarms that were continually sweeping through all this apparent loneliness that such a succession of incidents as we had so recently encountered would have struck me as little more than commonplace. It was only when I tried to vision affairs through the eyes of this girl at my side that I realized, for the first time, what all these succeeding menaces of the frontier must mean to a mind that had been receiving the mildest of impressions.

For the first time it came to me with full force how completely Baptiste and I had been accepting conditions as we found them, and how, all unwittingly, we had drifted close to the line which separates the civilized man from the primal. Also I realized, for the first time, how unnecessary in reality are many of the things which, as we grow accustomed to civilized life, we are inclined to look upon as essentials. The person who learns to do without such things is surprised at ever having accepted them at such magnified value. Shelter, food, and transportation — how they had grown from the cabin, the huntsman's kill, and the leaping horse beneath one . . .

The girl whose fortunes had been so strangely cast with ours had natural gifts as a saddlewoman. In her Indian dress, and with her long black braids flying in the wind, she might have been taken for some Indian princess, surrounded by

savage retainers. At first I thought that the tremendous pace at which the Indians had set out, which is characteristic of their use of horseflesh, would prove too much for the girl, but the wild excitement of the ride seemed to fire her blood, and with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, she entered into the spirit of the unrestrained gallop. Sometimes we rode through miles of wild flowers, which spread before us like carpets thrown down by giants of the plain. Thunder was ever in our ears as the hoofs beat out their unslackening rhythm. The unfurrowed, resilient sod seemed to give new strength to the splendid animals we bestrode. The dust rose behind us like yellow smoke, and the breeze turned it into spirals and sifted it over the nests of the frightened meadow-larks . . .

Baptiste rode on the other side of Annabel. In his suit of fringed buckskin, with his lithe figure swaying easily to every leap of his pony, he contrasted sharply with the bronzed figures about him. Occasionally he smiled at the girl and tossed her a reassuring word in French and I caught her answers above the drumming hoofbeats. A stab of pain came to me as I glanced across at the two young faces. It seemed to me that their exaltation was due to something more than the mere thrill of the ride. It was as if the Indians had dropped out of the picture, and I, John Crews, had gone with them, leaving Baptiste and Anna-

bel to ride alone among these flowery carpets . . .

In spite of the pace at which we were traveling, the dust-cloud behind us grew more pronounced. Wolf Bear brought his pony alongside mine, and, making use of the universal sign language, he informed me that a strong rear guard was to drop behind in order to keep the Sioux at a distance.

I motioned to Baptiste to remain with the girl, while I joined the warriors who were to fight the rear-guard action.

As our little detachment fell behind the main party, the Sioux made every effort to cut us off, but Wolf Bear was too old a leader to fall into a trap. The Sioux vanguard separated and tried to close in on either side of us, but, when this was attempted, Wolf Bear closed the gap between us and the fleeing column, with the result that the enemy was compelled to drop back and adopt single formation again, with nothing accomplished.

During the maneuvers I could not help but admire the horsemanship among pursuers and pursued. I have never met a military officer who would not freely admit that the Indians are the best natural horsemen and the greatest instinctive cavalrymen in the world. I have seen them go through complicated maneuvers with no other signal than a flashing bit of looking-glass, held in the hollow of a chieftain's hand. As we alternately fell back and advanced, with the Sioux flanking

us at each slackening of pace, it came to me that this was a war game old to these plains. It was the horsemen's thrust and parry, to bring out some weakness in the enemy. It must have been played for ages on this unscarred sod while Europe was developing its heavier, clumsier, and deadlier warfare . . .

The Sioux were becoming bolder in their movements, which, apparently, was what Wolf Bear desired. The flanking party on the right, led by a particularly aggressive young sub-chieftain, had approached nearer to us than one older and less impetuous would have counseled.

A detachment of our warriors dashed forth in a sortie directed at the nearest of the flanking party. Acting on impulse I set heels to the sides of my powerful mustang and rode with them. The Sioux hesitated momentarily, and this sufficed for us to deal one of those quick blows which mean so much in cooling a foe's aggressiveness. I brought my rifle to bear on the young sub-chieftain, and, as I fired, I saw him somersault to the ground, a pathetic spectacle in death. Two of his followers leaped from their horses and sought to gather up the huddled and silent form which had been their braggart leader.

I could have shot the rescuers, but forbore. Respect for a brave foe would have made it impossible for me to fire on them. But my followers had no such scruples, nor could I prevent them

from an act which, even though it is strictly in accord with the rules of Indian warfare, has always stirred me to resentment.

Three of my warriors dashed toward the rescuers and the body they were bearing from the battle-field. One of the rescuers fell, mortally wounded, and two Crow dare-devils, disregarding the fact that the Sioux lay within easy bow-shot of his companions of the flanking party, darted forward and counted *coup* on the fallen warrior. This was done by touching his body with their lances. A feat so performed under fire entitled a warrior to add an eagle feather to his *coup* stick and to do a great deal of camp-fire boasting at future gatherings of his tribe.

As we swung back toward the Crow column, the remainder of the flanking party had come up and was pressing us hard. I fired again, wounding another warrior. This seemed to complete the discouragement of the pursuers, for the two flanking detachments were recalled and the Sioux, now united, dropped back, evidently convinced that they were not strong enough to engage us successfully.

I found, on rejoining Wolf Bear, that we had not come out unscathed. Le Crochet had been in the party of Sioux that had attempted to flank us on the other side. A shot from his rifle had wounded a young Crow warrior. The shock, as the bullet had struck the Indian's shoulder, had

thrown the warrior from his pony. Another Crow had leaped to the ground and, helping the wounded man once more astride, had jumped to the pony's back behind him and both had ridden away successfully under the very lances of the Sioux.

As matters stood, we had accounted for three of the Sioux, as against one wounded man in our party. Also the pursuers were falling back. When it became apparent that pursuit had been abandoned for the time being, the Crows became proportionately jubilant. Snatches of war-songs were sung and I could hear many threats of vengeance uttered by the young warriors.

'Some of your young men, Wolf Bear, are brave in proportion to their distance from the enemy,' observed Baptiste. 'Their growls are getting louder as the Sioux are getting farther away.'

'Le Crochet is a devil,' responded the chief, 'and he has implanted the devil's fear in the breasts of many. It is good that we have Iron Hand with us. His name will be heard often at the scalp dance when we have joined our camp.'

I had not relished the work of fighting the Sioux, for, although Baptiste and I had never been over-friendly with them, finding them proud and difficult to get along with, we had managed to keep from an open breach with them, as with the Cheyennes and other tribes that were always inclined to be inimical toward trappers. I knew that it was only a question of a short time until

the hot-blooded Sioux were embroiled in a general conflict with the whites. The outrages which they were perpetrating were too flagrant to be long overlooked, and eventually there must come a war. But I had no desire to come to open conflict with the Sioux. Had it not been for the presence of Annabel in our party, I should have let the Indians fight matters out among themselves. But Le Crochet was using the Sioux as a means of striking at us. Whatever compact he had made with Abner for the capture of Annabel, its successful fulfillment would bring small joy to The Hook in comparison with the pleasure he would find in working out his vengeance on me. Under Le Crochet's protection, Abner and his men would be treated as allies among the very Indians who had threatened the Mormon wagon-train. With such forces working against us, it was no time to be withholding blows. I was glad we had struck heavily enough at the outset to make the Sioux wary of another attack.

We were traveling at an easier pace, now that our pursuers had disappeared. In fact, there were frequent rests, for our ponies were showing the effect of the hard pace at which they had been ridden. During these halts, Baptiste and I discussed with Wolf Bear the possibility of our getting back to the fort, Annabel watching anxiously as we carried on the debate in Crow language and sign talk.

Wolf Bear was of the opinion that we should find that the Sioux were out in great force, and that we should be unable to approach Fort Laramie. This alarmed us greatly, though we concealed our perturbation from Annabel.

The chief's opinion was borne out before we had gone many miles farther. In accordance with Indian custom when on the warpath, the Crows had sent scouts ahead. These outriders returned with the news that there were Sioux between us and Fort Laramie.

'What is Iron Hand to do now?' asked Wolf Bear. 'The Sioux between us and the fort are as clumps of sage on the prairie. We cannot fight our way through. Why not turn north with us, to the land of the Crows?'

I knew that the wish was father to the crafty chieftain's thought. The Sioux were stronger and more belligerent than at any other time in their history. To add the rifles of two white men to his defense would mean just so much greater security for Wolf Bear. Besides, his people were superstitious. The tribe had prospered once with a white leader in battle. I could catch the talk of the older men in the war-party to the effect that Iron Hand might be the one to bring the Crows back to their old power and to turn aside the threatened invasion of the Sioux.

'It would please us to live in the land of the Crows,' I said to Wolf Bear, 'but this young white

woman must be returned to her home far away where the sun rises, and where her people are as numerous as grasses in the valley.'

The chief grunted an inquiry, in which I fancied I could detect a note of disappointment.

'But how is she to be returned to her people,' he asked, 'when Le Crochet and his Sioux friends stand ready to prevent?'

'The great trail of the white men is only a few hours ahead of us,' I replied. 'Your war-party must cross it, anyway. Camp there until a wagon-train passes, on the way to Fort Laramie, and let us join the white people.'

Wolf Bear finally nodded a grudging assent. There was much eastbound travel on the trail. Settlers who had become discouraged because of long-continued hardships frequently turned back. In many instances the weak-hearted became sickened of their pioneering adventure when they heard vague stories of the dangers and difficulties yet to come. With the greater part of their troubles well over, they yielded to momentary panic and fled back to civilization.

If we could join one of these trains headed back along the trail, we could be assured of ample protection as far as Fort Laramie. It was one chance out of many, as sometimes travel was light, and days elapsed between the passing of one wagon-train and the next. I felt that Wolf Bear would not tarry long at the trail, partly because his warriors

were now in fear of an attack by an augmented body of Sioux, and partly because he would try by every means to have me accompany him to the Crow country. But I had hopes that fortune would smile upon us when we reached the trail.

We traveled in more leisurely fashion as we struck away from the mountain ridge at our left. Our scouts galloped forth again and were lost in the maze of the plains. They were to join us again at the trail. Unless they were surprised by the scouts of an even more crafty enemy, I knew they would not fail to appear at the place and hour of appointment.

Desirous of ascertaining what the trail was to yield to us, I rode at the head of the column with Wolf Bear. Baptiste and Annabel had dropped back among the last of the Crow warriors, who were now riding at ease. As I glanced back at them occasionally, I could see that Baptiste was instructing the girl in the mysteries of sign language. Her laughter mingled with that of the near-by warriors, who were much amused at her spelling of the simple messages given out by her youthful teacher. I did not go back to tell them of my plan for joining an emigrant train at the trail. It was just as well not to hold out hopes which might not be fulfilled. Wolf Bear looked back at the couple, and then glanced at me.

'It is still your wish to go to the fort, if we find white men on the great trail?' said the chieftain.

‘Yes, if the trail party is strong enough to resist any attack by the Sioux,’ I replied.

‘The Crows will be sorry to lose Iron Hand,’ mused Wolf Bear, again glancing back at Baptiste and Annabel. ‘The others with you — could not they be sent to the fort while Iron Hand remained with us? They are happy together, these your friends.’

I could not forbear a smile at the craftiness of the old chief. In order to get me to cast my lot with his people, he was trying to rouse jealousy in me, against Baptiste.

‘Nothing pleases me more than to see these young people happy together,’ I replied. ‘But I must go with this girl to the fort, or wherever else she finds safety.’

‘Yet, when you came to my lodge and first told me about this young woman,’ went on Wolf Bear, ‘it was plain enough that you wanted her for yourself. And now you are willing that your friend should have her. It is not so with my young men when they are in love.’

‘Wolf Bear,’ I replied, ‘there are many things which you and I might talk over and still be as men lost in the clouds on mountain peaks. But we are near the great trail and it will talk with a tongue that we can understand. Suppose we ride on ahead and see what it holds for us.’

Nothing loath, the chief whipped up his pony, at the same time motioning his warriors to

remain behind. Soon we had left the cavalcade far in the distance, and nothing broke the silence of the prairie but the sound of hoofs as our mounts sped onward toward the great highway which in a few months was to be thronged with gold-seekers.

Wolf Bear pointed to some birds circling in the air.

'The trail is there,' he said.

I had been watching the birds, and apprehension awoke within me, for I had never seen the creatures circle thus except when over the dead.

Rounding the final sandhill that stood between us and the trail, my fears were confirmed. A wagon-train, headed for Fort Laramie, had been attacked and destroyed. There had been seven wagons in the train, and there had been no opportunity for parking in a circle for defense. Or, if there had been such opportunity, the travelers had failed to grasp it, for never have I seen destruction more complete.

Household furniture, bedding, and boxes littered the prairie. Wearing apparel was scattered everywhere. We rode along the line of wrecked wagons, but found them all empty. Bodies of men were lying here and there. A broken rifle was clutched in the hand of one man, showing that he had fought bravely enough, though in futile fashion. There were two or three dead horses, evidently shot in the surprise attack. The rest of the live stock had been driven off.

The human survivors of the raid had been carried away, no doubt to wish many times that they could have exchanged places with those who lay in the sand beneath the circling birds.

We had hardly finished our hasty survey of the scene, which had been enough to convince me that there was no help that could be rendered, when the advance guard of our column rode up. I hastened back and met Baptiste before he and the girl had reached the spot of desolation. Halting them behind a sandhill, I explained what lay on the other side.

‘The Sioux have struck, and struck hard,’ I said. ‘I had hoped that we could join some such wagon-train as this, on the way back to Fort Laramie. But this will halt all travel on the trail.’

For the first time the girl’s defenses of courage seemed to be beaten down. She would have fallen from her horse had I not assisted her to the ground. Seated in the shade of the friendly sandhill which shut out the tragedy so close at hand, the girl slowly recovered her color.

‘Those poor people of the wagon-train,’ she said. ‘Is there nothing to be done for them?’

I shook my head.

‘Not even burial, in this sandy country. Their bones will soon be scattered by the wild animals.’

‘Were there — were there women in the wagon-

train?' finally she queried, as if the question had been forced from her against her will.

'No,' I lied, as readily and sturdily, I hope, as any man has ever lied.

'Oh, I am glad,' she said, with a sharp intaking of her breath. And then she put her head on her arms, as they rested on her knees, and fell to trembling. But it was only for a moment, for, after a swallow of warm water from Baptiste's canteen, she was quickly on her feet again, and, in a steady voice, asking what we were to do.

'There is only one thing left for us,' I answered. 'We must remain with these friendly Indians.'

'The white man's road is closed,' added Baptiste, 'and many a time have we taken the Indian trail instead, under like conditions, and found no harm thereon.'

As he spoke, Wolf Bear, at the head of his warriors, rode up beside us. The Crows had found that the Sioux had left nothing of value in the wreck of the wagon-train, and now they were eager to be on their way. The chief nodded in deep satisfaction as I helped the girl into her saddle and all three of us ranged our horses beside his at the head of the war-party.

But it was not until we were many hours on our journey that the girl's laugh rang out again and we knew that she could think of things other than the place of circling birds.

CHAPTER XI

WE found the permanent camp of the Crows on the banks of a mirror-like stream, a matter of eight days' journey to the north.

We were beset no more by Sioux on the way, but traveled cautiously none the less. Wolf Bear was an old and experienced warrior, and knew the depths of Sioux craftiness. In his own family he had counted many losses because of battles with the Sioux. But, after the manner of the typical fighting man of whatever color, he consoled himself with the thought that the souls of his slain relatives had been accompanied to the happy hunting ground by the spirits of many foes, and that, for every one of his women who had gashed her forehead or cut off her finger-joints because of losses of loved ones, there were counterbalancing manifestations of grief in enemy lodges. Grim and doubtful comfort, I maintain, but something that savage warriors are not alone in seizing upon.

'One year we were about to overwhelm the Sioux for all time,' observed Wolf Bear. 'We had warriors, and our plans were well made, but it was the will of Manitou that we should be scourged with smallpox. We lost half our fighting force, besides many women and children, owing to that visit of the Spotted Demon, and we have never

been able to do more than keep the Sioux out of the choicest hunting grounds of the Absaroke since that time.'

I knew how the Indians dreaded smallpox, as well they might. The faces of many of them — men, women, and children — bore the marks that showed them to be survivors of the disease, though how any of them lived, abandoned to their fate as smallpox sufferers were in Indian camps, was more than I could figure out. Well might a tribe dread anything that cut down its fighting strength, for life among the plains people was a matter of constant struggle under arms. Once let a tribe's fighting force be weakened, and extinction would follow swiftly, as in the case of the Mandans, who seemed to vanish in a night.

As we approached the camp of the Crows, our journey took on the semblance of a procession of triumph. Wolf Bear's warriors could not conceal their elation over having beaten off the Sioux and having added Baptiste and myself to their fighting force. We killed some buffaloes, and there was feasting each night and the vainglorying of the warriors became louder and longer as they neared home. . . . The three of us would watch these proceedings from some convenient hill, and then, each wrapped in a warm and wondrously pliable buffalo robe, would slumber until some Indian singer roused us at dawn with an invocation to the sun.

As we progressed, the mountain barrier at our left became lower and less forbidding, most of the hills being covered to their summits with lodge-pole pine. The plateau became less sterile and seamed with fewer arroyos, and we crossed wide valleys whose grasses brushed our moccasins as we rode.

'The land of the Absaroke is a good land,' sighed old Wolf Bear, in content.

Finally we saw the clustered lodges of the Indian camp standing out against the trees in one of the widest and most beautiful of the valleys. Annabel exclaimed involuntarily in pleasure at the prospect that had opened so suddenly to our vision.

We were welcomed with a pandemonium of sounds. Horsemen came scurrying to meet us, and the shrill greetings of the women and children fairly drowned the concerted barking of the dogs that swarmed everywhere. Bathers splashed out of the stream, and cooks deserted their fires.

We were to be assigned teepees close to the central lodge of Wolf Bear, but, at our request, were finally given a place at the edge of the camp, our tents facing the willow-bordered stream.

To my great relief, the girl was frankly delighted at the prospect of a considerable stay amid these idyllic surroundings. The camp, in such a spot of natural beauty, seemed like a haven of rest, after our long journeyings in the saddle. The Crow

women were friendly, and at the girl's first manifestation of interest in the Indian arts, she was fairly overwhelmed with offers of instruction.

'Just think what I shall be able to do when I return to civilization,' she laughed. 'Here I have been not twenty-four hours in this camp, yet I am beginning to learn beadwork, and how to dye eagles' feathers and porcupine quills, and how to make a fawnskin dress.'

'Why not utilize such knowledge in trade?' queried Baptiste. 'I can see all the fine ladies of St. Louis flocking to a sign: "Indian Dressmaking by an Expert."'

"Fine ladies!" echoed the girl. 'How empty that term sounds to me now. It seems, amid these silences and vast distances, that I have just begun to know what life means.'

Now this was talk that pleased me mightily, for I knew that in all probability we should have to bide long in this camp, and if homesickness were to grip the girl at the outset, the problem of our enforced stay would be greatly complicated. But she soon proved that her words were not mere empty reassurances for the benefit of Baptiste and myself. She busied herself taking charge of our little camp, and we sat down to dishes of which we had never dreamed and which proved most pleasant. There were long gallops over near-by hills, generally with Baptiste as her companion, for usually I remained close to Wolf

Bear. I have ever found that it is well to be prepared against emergency of any sort, and the surest of all preparation is the securing of knowledge from the fountain-head. Consequently, on invitation of Wolf Bear, I sat at the councils of the Indians and heard whatever went on that concerned the future of the camp.

Days passed, however, with nothing of significance coming up among the pipe-passing counselors who controlled the destinies of the tribe, and our own as well. Still I did not relax my vigilance. My ear was always strained to catch something which applied to ourselves. But apparently the spell of peace had descended upon the Crow warriors. The pipe was passed about the circle in which I sat, with no talk of warlike expeditions. The old men dreamed and the younger men boasted. Sometimes I nodded drowsily as the sun beat heavily upon the gaudily painted council lodge.

Baptiste, having been duly admitted to the tribe, was also privileged to sit in council, but we had agreed that one of us must always be near the girl to see that no harm befell. This pleasant task had mostly fallen to Baptiste, which was fitting, as he could talk more freely than I of books and all things else, and, besides, to-morrow's pending responsibilities never weighed so heavily upon his shoulders as upon my own. But it was not until the plaintive notes of a flute came to my ears

that I realized how love might have grown out of the long rides which Baptiste and Annabel had been taking.

When I made the discovery, the girl and I were sitting in the shade of the willows by the stream, talking of nothing in particular and listening to the sounds of camp and wilderness that mingled with the noise of the rippling water. It usually followed, at such a time, that I was given to sitting back and smoking and silently contemplating the girl's beauty, while she chatted of some new wonder that the plateau had yielded. When she spoke of the limpidness of the water at our feet, I thought only of the clearness of her eyes, and when she declared her joy in looking at the sunset which was reddening the western hills, I made mental note of the color it had brought to her cheeks.

We were sitting thus, she talking and I lazily assenting, the while marveling at her animation and charm, when I heard the notes of the flageolet. The sound of such music was not new to me. I have always stopped to listen whenever I have heard it, for Indian music is something that grows constantly in its appeal and will reward the searcher with many enchanting melodies, breathing of vast spaces and of romances born beneath boundless skies.

I had heard this same melody not many nights before, coming from the willows near at hand,

from which it now stole forth like the song of a sleepy bird. I recognized it as a fragment of a Chippewa love-song — an enchanting melody which no doubt had lured many an Indian maiden from her tent to meet her flageolet-playing wooer. It must be known that the Indians are not slow to adopt songs from other tribes, just as white men pick up melodies from far states and even from foreign countries. At Fort Laramie I have heard some emigrant whistling a lilt that perhaps he had learned back beyond the Big River, before he started his Western adventuring. The next day I have heard the same song hummed by a blacksmith at the post, to the smiting of hammer upon horseshoe. So it was that the Indians, though clannish in their tribal usages otherwise, made universal use of music.

The effect of the music upon the girl was instantaneous. The color deepened in her cheeks and her eyes sparkled with a new light, and I caught something in her laugh that had not been there before. Then it came to me that this was none other than Baptiste, who had been serenading her every night in such fashion, for he was gifted musically as in the line of poesy, which is merely another form of music. To pick up the tricks of the Indian flageolet was nothing at all for him.

Hardly had this thought come to my mind when the willows parted and Baptiste himself appeared,

playing the flageolet and advancing slowly toward us. As he finished, and flung himself down beside us, the girl applauded.

‘Bas Botsots (Strong Heart), the son of Wolf Bear, could not have done better,’ she said, ‘and I have heard him playing his heart out, all for love of little Esche Kuis (Sweet Mouth) who has been teaching me how to bead a moccasin.’

‘I yield no whit to Bas Botsots, either as a flageolet-player or as a lover,’ laughed Baptiste, as he put the instrument to his lips and played one melody after another — dances, war-songs, and love plaints.

Having been asked to attend a council of chiefs, I left them thus — the young fellow in his trapper’s garb fingering the musical instrument, and the girl in her Indian dress, occasionally sending mocking, trilling notes from her voice on the very heels of the flute sounds and fairly outdoing them in beauty of tone.

I was not unhappy as I left them, though perhaps there was something of sadness in my reflections. I knew that Baptiste loved the girl, not from what he had said about the Indian lover, but from the feeling he had put into his music. As for the girl, what was more natural than that she should return the love of one so manly and so gifted? Foolish would any maid be, in spurning the love of a poet. As for me — and here came the taste of bitterness in my reflections as I strode

through the village — I had nothing but a certain rude physical strength to commend me, and what is the strongest human arm but something to be withered and palsied in an hour, whereas a poet's handiwork can never die! . . .

As I neared the center of the camp, I heard a great wailing from the lodge of a warrior known as Hairy Moccasin. There was a crowd in front of the teepee — all women and children — and I knew from the sounds they echoed from within the tent that death had come to the head of this family. Feeling that this had something to do with the summons which had been sent me, I hastened to Wolf Bear's lodge and found the chief seated, with most of his council, and with the pipe circulating.

'Let Iron Hand be seated,' said Wolf Bear gravely. 'He is just in time, for something has come up on which we shall be glad of his counsel.'

I sat down, and, knowing better than to ask questions, waited for enlightenment.

'Iron Hand heard mourning at the lodge of Hairy Moccasin?' queried the chief.

'Yes.'

'The mourning was for Hairy Moccasin himself. He has been brought in by his young men, dead.'

I had seen Hairy Moccasin only a few days before — one of the finest warriors among the Crows.

‘He was a brave man and in his full strength when I saw him last,’ I replied. ‘How came Hairy Moccasin to die?’

‘It was the work of Strikes the Lance,’ said the chief.

I made no answer, though in a flash it came to me what had happened and what was expected of me. Strikes the Lance was a Sioux chief who had long carried dismay to the Crow tribe. He was supposed to bear a charmed life, and it was his custom to invite the strongest warriors of opposing tribes to come out and meet him in single combat with lance or knife. Never had he been known to receive so much as a wound, though he had met the most skilled fighters of half a dozen tribes that were not on friendly terms with the Sioux. His reputation had spread to the uttermost ends of the prairie, and his name was used to frighten little children into obedience. The threat that Strikes the Lance might be lurking near a camp was sufficient to send boys and girls scurrying home.

I had seen Strikes the Lance at Fort Laramie, at the head of a war-party of Sioux, and I remembered him as an Indian of tremendous stature, with a huge head, mighty shoulders, and a face villainously painted. His body was naked from the waist up, with the exception of a robe decorated with many otter tails, which hung from one shoulder. Baptiste and I both remarked

on the Indian's evident strength, but agreed that we could not see how he had come unscathed through so many combats with men who were fully as strong and agile as he.

'Hairy Moccasin and a party of young men were hunting,' said Wolf Bear, 'and they had gone far toward the land of the Dacotahs. They met a Sioux band of about their own strength and were about to give battle, when Strikes the Lance rode out and sent his usual challenge. Hairy Moccasin was our mightiest warrior. He said he would go out and give battle to Strikes the Lance, for the honor of the Crows. He chose to fight with lances, and Strikes the Lance agreed. Hairy Moccasin was a wonderful fighter with the lance, yet he was stretched in death before the fight had more than started.'

'I am sorry,' I said, as the chief paused, 'but it is the death warriors must expect to die.'

'It is not alone the question of death. Strikes the Lance has slain four of our great warriors in this way — some with the knife and others with the lance. He has killed the best fighters among the Arapahoes and the Shoshones and the Black-foot tribe.'

'The blood of the other tribes must be weakening. Is one Sioux braggart to make the best of his foes forget their courage as soon as they face him on the field?'

'There is something strange about it all,' went

on Wolf Bear. 'The four Crow warriors who were slain by Strikes the Lance were not men whose blood turned to water on the battle-field. They were all as mighty and as skilled as Strikes the Lance. When matters are equal in single combat, four men do not die, one after another, unless —'

The chief shook his head and drew several times at the pipe. I said no word, for I knew what was passing in his mind. In a moment he had said the thing which I knew was coming.

'Iron Hand is a true friend of the Crows,' he declared, looking into the smoke clouds of his own making. 'We know him to be an enemy of the Sioux. We have lost our great white chieftain, Red Axe. He would have hunted out Strikes the Lance and slain him. But Red Axe has gone from us. Like him, Iron Hand is a man mighty in strength. Also he is gifted in all the arts of battle. If Iron Hand would show his friendship for the Crows, let him kill Strikes the Lance.'

I made no answer, knowing that none would be required until I was fully ready to reply. I knew the Red Axe of whom the chieftain spoke — a trapper who had lived among the Crows and had fought many battles for them, reveling in bloody deeds and striking terror among the other tribes.

Also I knew how great a part was played by superstition among all Indians. The Crows and other plains tribes that were under the spell of terror cast by this one Sioux were not in fear of

Strikes the Lance himself. They feared his 'medicine.' Something was playing on their over-developed sense of the supernatural. I knew that the Indian's mental backgrounds were filled with strange shadows — gods and half gods, few of which were kindly. The mere rattling of seeds in a gourd would suffice to bring terrifying visions to strong men who would brave incredible things on the warpath, but who were turned to children at the least hint of anything they could not at once understand.

Meditating on these things, I left the silent circle still smoking in the lodge, without giving answer to the chief's proposal that I meet Strikes the Lance in combat. None of the Indians manifested the slightest surprise or impatience when I left. Imperturbable, grave-featured, elderly men they were, most of them, who had seen many battle-fields and had done heroic things thereon. Yet I knew that in their thoughts there was running an undercurrent of uneasiness caused by the death of Hairy Moccasin. The morale of the tribe was weakening under this growing dread of an enemy who seemed to be more than mortal.

The mourning for Hairy Moccasin had been taken up by the entire camp when I left the chief's lodge. The sounds had filled Annabel with alarm, and she had retired to her tent, Baptiste being alone at the camp-fire when I came up in the

dusk. I told him, briefly, of Hairy Moccasin's death and the superstitious terror that was beginning to grip the Crows, and of Wolf Bear's proposal that I fight Strikes the Lance.

'It is plain enough to me that if Strikes the Lance is not put out of the way, the Crows are going to be quite demoralized,' I said. 'Nor would it surprise me to learn that Le Crochet and Abner are using Strikes the Lance as a means of rendering this tribe helpless before a general Sioux attack.'

'Then let me be the one to fight,' urged Baptiste. 'There is no Indian weapon that I cannot use. There is too much dependent on you for your life to be risked in this way. If I am killed, you can take Annabel and make your escape, even if the Sioux launch an overwhelming attack, as you fear.'

Baptiste had leaped to his feet as he spoke. The firelight brought out his tall, lithe figure, in red relief. His eyes sparkled with the determination of the real fighting man. It was as he had said. He was marvelously skilled with every Indian weapon. Also there was none more deft of hand or quicker of foot. Yet something told me that he was not the one to be sent against this extraordinary champion who was bringing such moral support to the Sioux. So I shook my head, in spite of Baptiste's protestations.

'It is not to be as you would have it, Baptiste,'

I said. 'You are not the one who has been asked to fight for the Crows. If I pass the responsibility on to you, the Crow women will laugh at me as I go past their teepees, and the Crow children will set their dogs on me. The old women will call on me to help them gather wood.'

Baptiste was silent, knowing that I was not to be changed from my purpose. Sitting down, he fell to smoking furiously, and I knew that he was troubled.

'What do you make of all these victories of Strikes the Lance?' he asked finally. 'And of the challenges as well? It is not like Indians to fight alone in such fashion.'

'It means, in the first place, that Strikes the Lance has gone into every combat knowing that he is wielding a certain superstitious fear over his enemy. His has been the power of the medicine man as well as the warrior.'

'But is there not something outside of mere superstition — some trickery that may give him an advantage over you?'

'I have had some such thought in mind. Just what trickery there may be, I am not prepared to say, but at any rate I hope to find out when I get this Sioux at arm's length.'

Baptiste remained at the fire smoking, long after I had retired to my teepee. His thoughts were upon Strikes the Lance, but mine were not when I sought my buffalo robe. Instead, my mind

was filled with the picture made by Baptiste and Annabel, as they sat among the willows, with the notes of flute and voice mingled in melodies that were born of the wilderness.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN I told Wolf Bear that I would meet Strikes the Lance if such meeting were deemed necessary to the welfare of the Crow tribe, my pledge was received with a grunt of satisfaction and then apparently the whole matter was forgotten, as I heard no more of it for a considerable time.

As for myself, I did not give it much thought when once my word had been passed, for, when hazards were so many, neither one more nor less could make any great difference in a trapper's scheme of life. In fact it seemed to me that our existence on this great, lonely, peak-crowned plateau was ordered much like that of any of the other animals of a fighting kind. If instinct or claws failed us, then we must make room for a successor better equipped. Let there be the slightest slackening of mental or muscular impulse — the involuntary yielding, perhaps, to the sleep demands of insidiously creeping old age, or the more common ailment of overconfidence — and life was the payment we must make.

I have no doubt that a man, used to the well-ordered ways of civilization, if thrust suddenly into such a mode of life, would be utterly crushed beneath the sense of personal responsibility to self. I have seen such men fret themselves into sick-

ness — starting up from their blankets or buffalo robes at night and calling out loudly about imaginary dangers. Sometimes they so completely unfitted themselves temperamentally for the plains life that they were carried into the very dangers which they sought to avoid. So much can be charged to that sense of super-responsibility which is akin to fear.

With Baptiste and myself it was different. We had become accustomed to wilderness exigencies during the receptive years at the border-line of youth and manhood, when self-confidence takes quickest root. Also we found a rude yet comforting philosophy sustaining us. It was not alone a blind confidence in our senses and muscles, but I know that each of us had come to trust a higher guidance. That we could see and hear quickly the varied signs and symbols of the prairie and the sky above it, was not a matter of particular credit to us. Behind those gifts there lay still higher assurances from the Gift-Maker — and those assurances alone enabled us to sleep as we did between the four black walls of the prairie night.

So, as I say, I made no inquiry tending to stir up the matter of the meeting with Strikes the Lance. Nor was any one else giving it thought, apparently. Hairy Moccasin was buried in a towering cottonwood tree, and his war-horse was slaughtered at the foot thereof. The scarred foreheads and amputated fingers of his women-folk

had all but healed, and apparently life in the camp was going on as it had gone when we had first come to the Crow lodges. But I knew that the news had gone forth to every teepee that I was to fight Strikes the Lance. Children stopped their play as I passed, and pointed at me, whilst they talked in whispers, and the women who knelt at the stream-side paused over the garments they were washing and called on all friendly Indian deities, from Old Man Coyote down, to strengthen my right arm, that I might hurl the Sioux back to the Dacotahs.

Meantime I could gather no encouragement from such news as we gained at the councils. This news was secured from scouts sent out by Wolf Bear, and from the members of horse-stealing expeditions. Young Indians, intent on achieving glory for themselves, or perhaps desirous of acquiring horses enough to enable them to make the matrimonial venture, were constantly going out in small parties and coming home with information concerning enemy affairs, even though they might bring no ponies.

The general news from scouts and horse-raiders was that the Sioux were pressing closer to the Crow lands, in greater numbers than ever, and apparently more arrogant than for many years.

Finally the leader of one of these pony-stealing expeditions brought direct news of Strikes the Lance, and I was summoned to council.

'Strikes the Lance is camped, with a large war-party, far on this side of the line that divides the land of the Dacotahs from the land of the Absarokes,' said Wolf Bear, as I entered the council lodge. 'Le Crochet is with him, as are the other white men we drove away from Iron Hand.'

It did not surprise me to learn that The Hook and Abner were taking quick advantage of this new ally that Fate had thrown across their trail.

'Strikes the Lance has sent word that after he has slain the best fighter the Crows can send against him, the Sioux will drive the rest of us into the Bad Lands and take this rich land of the Absarokes for themselves.'

'I am ready to fight Strikes the Lance, as you know,' I replied.

'Good!' was the chief's rejoinder, which was echoed around the council ring. 'I knew that Iron Hand would not fail his friends. In fact I have already sent one of our young men, with a reply to the challenge of Strikes the Lance, telling this boastful Sioux that we have one who will meet him.'

'When and where is it to be?'

'The Sioux will be at the great tower, awaiting the Crows and their champion. It is a matter of five suns' journey from here. We start in the morning. There must be dancing to-night, to

put our young warriors in proper spirit and to strengthen the hearts of our women who wait.'

I could not forbear a smile, as I left the lodge, for thinking how the wily chief had arranged matters so there could be no possible retreat on my part, had I been inclined to withdraw my pledge to fight the Sioux. I had resolved to tell Annabel nothing of what impended. She would not be greatly disturbed over my absence from the camp for a few days. If I failed to return, Baptiste must do the best he could to get her out of the path of the Sioux who undoubtedly would try to make good their boast to drive the Crows out of the country.

It was well enough to make such decisions, but I found that I had neglected to forestall gossip, which runs as freely from lodge to lodge in the wilderness as from door to door in town. Annabel had made numerous friends among the Indian women. She had not held herself aloof, but, by kindly word and deed, had set herself on a sisterly plane. She found no lack of friends to show her the mysteries of all the arts in which Indian women excel — the needlework, with sinew as thread, the beadwork, and even some of the lighter forms of tanning. These things had helped make camp life full of interest for her. Also it had all put her in much closer touch with community affairs than I had imagined. Consequently I had scarce begun to overhaul my firearms and other

equipment, against the excursion of the morrow, when the girl was asking me to reconsider the meeting with Strikes the Lance.

'I cannot believe that Wolf Bear is a real friend if he is sending you on such a mission,' she cried at last, out of patience with my reiterations that my word had been given and the thing must be gone through with.

'It is not a matter of Wolf Bear's friendship, nor of my feelings in the affair,' I replied. 'There is the general safety of all of us to be considered. Unless this menace is removed and the Crows recover from this blight of fear which Strikes the Lance has imposed upon them, our last barrier will be swept away as easily as a cloudburst might sweep away yonder beaver dam in the middle of this stream.'

We had walked to the edge of the stream as we talked, and were standing where Baptiste and the girl had sat when it first came upon me that they might be in love. As Annabel bent down one of the bushes, on the leaves of which the first frosty nights of September had put their red flare, I realized how far toward womanhood she had traveled in all these weeks of adventuring. It was not that the hot suns and burning winds had put their mark upon her. In fact, it seemed to me that Nature must have tempered her harsher forces, so far as the girl was concerned, for only a deepened color in her cheeks told of the hours

which she had spent in the open. As for the desperate hazards which we had taken, they seemed to have taken no toll of her whatever. The apprehension which I had caught in her eyes in the emigrant camp when I had first met her, and later at Fort Laramie, had disappeared, and in its place had come a serenity of expression which gave me unbounded satisfaction, for I felt that such calm could have come about only through complete trust in her guardians. I felt my heart grow big with gratitude at the thought that I had won such confidence, even though I could not hope for any stronger manifestation from her.

The girl ceased pleading, save with her eyes, when she found that my mind was settled. She tried to talk calmly, but a sob in her voice was harder for me to resist than all her words of dissuasion had been.

‘Are you not afraid of treachery, John Crews?’ she asked.

‘Why fear something that does not exist?’ I answered. ‘The Indian has no rule of warfare, except to win. Fair and foul are unknown terms to him. When you are prepared to meet any kind of attack, therefore, it can be said that treachery does not exist for you.’

‘I have heard such tales of this Indian’s strength, and how he paralyzes the arms of his strongest foes.’

‘Do not let any of the fears of the Indian

women take hold of you. This Indian is only a man, and matching sinews with him should be no such great affair. All this fear concerning the supernatural gifts of Strikes the Lance is something to tell the children at the teepee fire.'

'But he has slain so many.'

'Superstition made them easy victims.'

'I am afraid there is more than superstition concerned. The Indian must have some substantial trick, which should be guarded against.'

I smiled at her concern for my fate, and would have had her continue her talk in such strain indefinitely, for what man is there who fails to thrill at the thought that some woman cares a great deal whether he lives or dies?

'You have already given me much that will sustain me,' I said, finally. 'See — I have the flower you gave me on the day of the buffalo hunt. But even if this Indian should prove the better man, Baptiste will still be here to care for you.'

I was on the point of adding that it was Baptiste she cared most for, anyway, but fortunately I held my tongue from such unfairness. Indeed, I was even sorry afterward that I had shown her the flower, for it occurred to me, on sober reflection, that it was an ill-timed display of sentiment. It had been my thought, ever since the maid's fortunes had been cast with ours, that there should be no word or deed of mine calcu-

lated to show her that I regarded her with more than a brotherly affection. After she had been returned to her home, with my responsibilities ended, she could view her life in better perspective. Then, perhaps, such wilderness products as Baptiste and myself would not bulk large. A romance born in these magic hills might quickly die amid the surroundings of civilization. . . . Well, one could always go back to his traps, and none could cheat him of the hours of forgetfulness which come with the outdoor man's deep slumber.

I was roused by the touch of the girl's hand on my shoulder.

'When a knight went forth to battle as you are doing,' she said, 'he wore his lady's glove in his hat. I have no glove, but here is a kiss to go with my prayers.'

Then her arms slid round my neck, and, stooping, I crushed her to me, with her lips on my own. Only an instant did I hold her thus. No sooner had her feet touched the ground, and my arms were loosed from their clasp, than she ran to her teepee, but I knew she was not angered, for she called back over her shoulder:

'Remember, my prayers are with you.'

But at the instant I could remember nothing but the pressure of those warm lips on my own, and the yielding of that lithe form in my clumsy embrace.

As I turned again to my final task, Baptiste stood close at hand. I knew he must have seen, but he said nothing. . . . We talked only of the best course he might take, in an effort to break through to Fort Laramie with Annabel, in case I should fail to win the encounter with the Sioux.

The great tower, which had been chosen as our meeting-place, was a fluted pillar of stone which rose like a lighthouse in the plains, far from the mountains and with not so much as a near-by hill to dwarf its magnificence.

The tower was smooth on all sides, except for longitudinal erosions, which looked as if they had been carved by some mighty artisan. All near-by tribes had looked reverentially upon this tower for many generations. It was a meeting-place for the tribes when there were friendly councils to be held, and it was the scene of many battles. Generally the Indians drifted toward it merely to worship. To watch the tower's impressive crown, against the blue sky and racing white clouds of summer, or to gaze upon that great shadow, constantly lengthening during the afternoon or flung like a dark path across the reddened sage in the sunrise hour — these were the things that fitted in with the Indian's religion.

Also the tower had been woven into the traditions of many a plains tribe. No man had ever scaled its walls. In fact this smooth monolith

would hardly afford footing for an eagle, except on its rounded summit.

There were springs at the base of the huge pillar, and a stream afforded plenty of water for pony herds. Countless camps had been made near the tower, and a Babel of tongues had been heard around it, for it stood almost on the boundary-line between Sioux, Crow, Arapahoe and Shoshone.

There were forty warriors in our party that rode toward the tower, and it was understood that there were to be not more of the Sioux. Probably this meeting-place had been the scene of many individual encounters of the sort now under way, but it occurred to me that I must be the first white man to figure in such an affair.

I had not seen Annabel since our parting the evening before, as our start had been early. A handclasp and a few whispered words with Baptiste, and I had ridden away.

We arrived at the tower at the time agreed upon — the morning after the third sleep from our camp. Never had the great rock looked more impressive, as it stood out, blood-red in the September sunrise. The Sioux could be seen circling about the plain on their horses. Evidently they were ready and waiting.

There was a brief parley between Wolf Bear and the leader of the Sioux, in which I took no part. Enough of the *code duello* was observed by

the Indians so that the challenged individual had the choice of weapons. I had told Wolf Bear that the meeting was to be with knives. The knife would give me a chance to come to grips with this sinister Sioux, which the lance would not. There was a saying among the trappers that next to having a foe between your rifle sights, there was nothing like having him between your palms.

Wolf Bear returned at a hand-gallop that hardly fluttered his headdress.

'Iron Hand is to advance, with no other weapon than his knife,' said Wolf Bear. 'Strikes the Lance will do likewise. The Sioux and Crows are to remain where they are, even when the fight is over. The field is the victor's.'

I dismounted and handed my reins to a warrior.

'Is Iron Hand not going to strip for battle?' asked Wolf Bear.

'Nothing more than this,' and here I laid off my buckskin coat and rolled up the sleeves to my hunting-shirt. Then I loosened the knife in the scabbard at my belt, and walked forward, to meet a solitary figure that approached me from the Sioux line.

The make-up of Strikes the Lance was more hideous than that in which Baptiste and I had seen him at Fort Laramie. Buffalo horns projected from his headdress. His broad, flat face was painted with various colors, and a gourd in his left hand gave forth a continuous rattle as he

advanced to meet me, shouting threats and incantations as he came.

Both of the medicine man's mighty arms were bare, but, to my surprise, he wore an oddly decorated shirt of deerskin, instead of being stripped to the waist in customary Indian fashion.

Strikes the Lance, with a huge knife flashing in his right hand, was evidently bent on making the fight a short one, as he rushed toward me without preliminary. As he did so, there came a long shout from the Sioux warriors, who evidently had been accustomed to seeing this first rush end matters.

I did not give ground before Strikes the Lance, as he had plainly expected. Nor did I draw my knife from its sheath. Instead, I met his rush firmly, and, catching his wrist as he struck at me, I tripped him and flung him to one knee before he could close with me.

This maneuver, brief and indecisive as it was, brought a shout of encouragement from the Crow warriors behind me. Enraged, Strikes the Lance sprang from the ground and rushed at me, his face convulsed with a rage that was truly demoniacal. I had learned the thing I sought to know, however, and was prepared for the final onslaught. Drawing my hunting-knife, I sprang to meet the Indian, and, again catching his wrist, though this time with my left hand, I drove my blade at his throat, instead of at his heart.

As the steel found its mark, our bodies came

together in a brief embrace. The Indian weighed as much as I, and never had I grappled with a man better sinewed, but he was dead almost before his breast touched mine.

As I flung the Indian's body from me, I threw myself flat on the ground, and it was well that I did so, for I heard the whistle of a bullet over my head, and then came the report of a rifle from the Sioux line. I could have picked out the sound of that rifle among a thousand, and knew it to be the same that I had heard on the day of the buffalo hunt, when Le Crochet had been in competition with me.

In a moment, however, I was surrounded by the shouting Crows, who could not be restrained from rushing to my aid at this act of treachery on the part of our foes. As for the Sioux, the sudden and unlooked-for termination of the duel had put them in a temporary state of indecision. Fended off by threatening Crow horsemen, the Sioux made only a half-hearted effort to recover the body of Strikes the Lance. Then they slowly withdrew to the eastward.

The body of my adversary lay across a hummock of sage, strangely contorted. One powerful arm was bent under the Indian's back, and the other was outstretched, the fingers still clutching the handle of the great knife. The buffalo head-dress was still in place, and the painted features looked even more hideous in death than in life.

Superstitious dread of the medicine man still gripped the Crows, for they kept at a respectful distance as Wolf Bear and I inspected the body.

‘Do you want to know why this man slew Hairy Moccasin and so many other great fighters so easily?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ said Wolf Bear.

With my hunting-knife I ripped open the deer-skin jacket and exposed a corselet of iron.

‘Here is the answer,’ I said, tapping the corselet with the heel of my knife.

Then, as clearly as I could, I explained that this was part of a suit of mail which the Sioux evidently had found many years before and which they had kept for their ceremonials. Strikes the Lance, being shrewder than his fellows, had conceived the idea of wearing the armor beneath a coat of deerskin and then making the claim that he was proof against the weapons of any foe.

The armor was of Spanish design and finely wrought, and I had no doubt that it was worn by one of the Conquistadores who penetrated as far as our Kansas plains many years before.

As I explained this to Wolf Bear, he nodded, affirmatively.

‘I have heard stories about those first white men,’ he said. ‘Such tales have come down from the lodge fires of my father’s father, and they tell of strange, fierce men who could not be slain by our arrows or lances.’

'It was because they wore armor similar to this,' I replied. 'When I threw Strikes the Lance, I felt this corselet beneath his deerskin jacket. Then I struck at his throat instead of at his breast. The other men he fought must have turned their steel against this armor. Let us take it with us, that some Crow may wear it and become as mighty as Strikes the Lance.'

Cutting the leather thongs of the ancient piece of armor, I removed it from the body of Strikes the Lance. I fastened the corselet across the great body of Chate Nakish (Leads a Wolf), one of the most sturdy and valiant of the Crow warriors. Then the other Indians, with their superstitious fears removed, amused themselves by striking at his breast with knives and spears, while Chate Nakish laughed them to scorn.

Thus it was that we rode back to the Crow camp, with the scalp of Strikes the Lance dripping from Chief Wolf Bear's *coup* stick, the Indians singing in triumph, and myself in better spirits, for now I knew that the Sioux would let us alone for a while at least, and that we were in no immediate danger of being overwhelmed by the red terror that had threatened the girl Annabel.

CHAPTER XIII

I HAD never witnessed a wilder scene than was enacted in the Crow camp during the night following our return from the successful encounter with the Sioux.

Great fires were set roaring in the camp. There was no bit of Indian finery, apparently, that was not worn that night. The fluttering headdresses of the dancers, the throbbing of the tom-toms, the shouts of the warriors, and the shrill screams of the women onlookers — these things combined to impress me with the saddening thought that here was barbarism at its peak.

The scalp of Strikes the Lance was the chief center of interest. It had been stretched within a small hoop, according to Indian custom. The hoop dangled from a lance, and about this central trophy the ceremonials of the evening were conducted.

Usually at such ceremonies the lances bearing scalps were placed in a circle and the warriors danced about them. Each warrior who had taken a scalp told in boastful language how it had come about. Those who failed were given opportunity of explaining how some god had interfered with their success, which would not happen next time. In this case, there being but one scalp, the war-

riors danced about it, as I have seen school-children at home dancing about a Maypole.

Refusing all importunities to join the dance, or even to tell how I had slain Strikes the Lance, I stood with Baptiste and Annabel on a near-by hilltop and watched the scene below us, as the pictures stood out dimly or in strong relief, according to the waxing and waning of the fires.

‘I feel safer at a distance,’ said the girl, shuddering and drawing a blanket more closely about her shoulders. ‘I love these people in their quieter moods, but now —’

Nor was it surprising that she spoke as she did, for the dancers had outdone all previous efforts in making themselves hideous. Warriors had spent hours in their lodges, painting their bodies in eccentric designs with varied colors. Some wore headdresses made of the heads of buffaloes, bears, wolves, and other animals, the characteristics of which were imitated by the dancers. Even the Indian children, accustomed as they were to the strange masquerades of camp, were amazed at the things which had been done to make this carnival exceptional. They shrieked with mingled terror and delight as the dancers thrust their faces close to the ring of spectators, grimacing like gargoyles.

‘It looks like utter *abandon* — a sloughing of all restraint and a hopeless return to the chaos from which we have all sprung,’ mused Baptiste,

'but there are certain things to be caught here and there which tell of tribal discipline.'

'In what way?' asked the girl.

'You will notice that the chief is not taking part in the dance. He is the ever-watchful one. A shout from him would end this ceremony instantly and darken all those fires. Then, the older warriors — not the very old men, but the veterans who still ride to the kill and who are training the younglings — are a great, controlling force. They are the secret society that exercises the most potent force on camp life. They represent police discipline, and they choose the grass and water where each camp is to be made, and carry out the chief's orders for punishment, besides inflicting penalties of their own. So you see the Indian is not the free agent that he seems. The heavy hand of tribal government is always upon him, even at times like this.'

As Baptiste spoke, a slight noise in the sagebrush near us attracted my attention, and I saw two Indians, a man and a woman, who had crept close to us and were watching the dance from our vantage-point. I motioned them to come closer, and soon had their story.

'This man's wife stole something from a neighbor's lodge,' I said. 'If either one of them had stolen all that could be carried from a white man, or from the lodge of a member of another tribe, it would have been strictly within the Indian code of

honor. In fact it would have brought considerable credit to the thief. But to steal from a member of one's tribe is a high crime. This woman has been terribly beaten, and it happens that, according to the Indian law, her husband must suffer with her. So he has been beaten also, and they have been stripped of all their possessions and thrust forth into the world. If they remain with the camp, they must stay only upon its fringes, subsisting on less than the camp dogs are able to forage.'

With an exclamation of sympathy, Annabel took the blanket from her shoulders and would have put it on the Indian woman, but Baptiste stopped her with a warning gesture.

'That would never do, Mistress Warmheart,' he said smilingly.

'But there is frost in the air and the woman is cold.'

'So is the man, and I am sorry for both of them, but if we give them food or shelter we break the law of the tribe.'

'Does the law of the tribe transcend the law of human kindness?'

'Sometimes. These people are living in the midst of dangers by night and day. They cannot afford to harbor dissension. There must be no lack of coördination. All must be loyal to the one idea — the safety of the tribe. If there were theft unpunished among their own people, there would soon be internal enmities and finally tribal dissolution.'

‘What do you say, John Crews?’ asked the girl, only half convinced ‘Must these people suffer because they have broken a camp law?’

I nodded.

‘Baptiste is right, Little Friend Who Sings,’ I replied, giving the girl the name which the Indian women had bestowed on her.

As I spoke, the voice of Wolf Bear sounded in greeting to us, and the chieftain approached from the outer darkness, into which our sad visitors melted like shadows.

‘There will be pleasant dreams to-night in the lodges of the Crows because of what Iron Hand has done in slaying Strikes the Lance,’ said the chief. ‘We are grateful and would show our gratitude. What favor is there for Iron Hand to ask of us?’

‘A war-party of Crows sufficient to make sure of our getting back to Fort Laramie.’

Wolf Bear hesitated.

‘Iron Hand has asked the one thing that cannot be done just now,’ he said. ‘The Sioux, though they have given over a direct attack upon us, are keeping large bodies of warriors between us and the fort.’

‘That is the work of Le Crochet and Abner,’ I replied. ‘If they cannot prevail upon the Sioux to attack us, they are at least going to try to prevent our reaching the fort.’

‘True enough,’ agreed Wolf Bear. ‘Also there

are Cheyennes with the Sioux, so our young men report. It would take many warriors to cut their way through.'

'What, then, is your advice?'

'Wolf Bear advises Iron Hand to wait, perhaps until winter. The snows will drive the Sioux and Cheyennes to their lodges. Then Iron Hand and his companions can be taken to the fort.'

Baptiste and I knew that it would not do to show impatience, even at the prospect of a wait of weeks and perhaps months in the Crow camp. The talk was carried on in the Crow tongue, so the girl did not know its portent.

'Another thing,' went on Wolf Bear, reflectively. 'The Crows will be sorry to part with Iron Hand and his brother the Song-Maker, and their sister, whose voice is like the meadow-lark's. Wolf Bear and his people know that Iron Hand has saved them from invasion by the Sioux, who have long coveted our lands. When Iron Hand and his companions go from the land of the Absarokes, it will not be with empty hands. Money means much in the land of the palefaces, but to the Indian it means nothing. We are children and, I fear, will always be as children.' The old chieftain paused, lost in painful reflection, apparently, concerning the future of his people.

'Here in the land of the Crows,' he went on, 'there are more beaver than anywhere else on the plains or in the high hills, and I have been wher-

ever it is possible for a man to go. It is a land that the Great Spirit has smiled upon, and if we do not share our bounty with our friends, the smiles of Manitou will turn to frowns and this land will become as bare as the scarred lands of the Sioux and as hot as the plains where the Kiowas and Comanches ride. Iron Hand and his brother are welcome to trap where they will, and our young men shall help you, so that when you go there will be many horses loaded down with furs that will be yours.'

Having told us the plan, which no doubt had been talked over and decided upon in council, the chief would not hear our thanks, but abruptly left us and strode back to the dance circle.

We returned to our own teepees, leaving the triumphal celebration still in progress, Baptiste explaining to Annabel the details of the old chief's offer.

'Now indeed have you brought us wealth a second time,' said Baptiste. 'Though we never find the golden sandbar again, still our partnership will prosper. Trappers have been trying for years to get the consent of the Crows to trap on these streams. Some have been allowed to do trapping in moderation — but to have the freedom of the Crow country and the aid of the tribe means that we shall have pack-horses without number, all laden with our peltries.'

To my satisfaction, the girl manifested no con-

cern over the prospect of having to remain longer in the Crow camp. Instead, she laughed heartily at Baptiste's glowing picture of our pack-train of furs drawing up at Fort Laramie.

'What does such wealth mean to you?' she asked. 'For what will you exchange all these packs of beaver-skins, on horses that are white and bay and black and spotted?'

'A life of ease in a house that is lined with books in every room.'

The girl laughed again, and seized Baptiste's hand, drawing him to the firelight and affecting to study the lines of his palm.

'Such a prophecy and this palm do not go together,' she said. 'There is much here that hints of knowledge pursued, but whether gained or not, I cannot tell. But of ease I see no indication. A long life and an inky one, would be my prophecy concerning the owner of this hand.'

'How about John, here?' queried Baptiste, a little taken aback.

The girl seized my great paw in her supple fingers, and, drawing me close to the firelight, studiously traced the lines in my palm. Nor did I ever see a prettier sight than she made, with her laughing, fair face in the flickering ruddiness and the blackness of her hair outdoing the shadows of the night.

'H'm!' she exclaimed, with an arch frown. 'Here is more of ease and high living in prospect.

While Baptiste is sweating under the goading of the fiends from the ink-pot, John Crews will be taking life pretty much as he pleases, back in the country where there are plenty of people to be ordered about by His Lordship.'

'A country magistrate, no doubt,' chuckled Baptiste, 'fining small boys for stealing from orchards. Lord! what a come-down for a fighter of Indians! Might I keep your court records, Mr. Magistrate?'

'Not in rhyme, or you are the first I'll send to jail,' I responded, and thus we bantered away the shank of the evening, until finally the girl sought her teepee, trilling a song as she went.

When she had gone, Baptiste said, soberly enough:

'What is there behind the game Wolf Bear is playing? He did not tell us his real reason for not giving us an escort to Fort Laramie without delay. The Crow warriors are arrogant enough, now that Strikes the Lance is out of the way, to welcome a chance to fight through any number of surrounding Sioux.'

'I agree with you,' I replied. 'Wolf Bear was hiding something from us, and it made him troubled in spirit, for he is a straightforward Indian. I think the Indians who are strong in the council have raised objections to letting me depart from the tribe.'

'It was the same with Beckworth, who was

called Red Axe when he was their chief,' said Baptiste.

'Exactly. When the Crows were led by Red Axe, they lost no battles. When Red Axe left them, bad luck ensued. Their foes overran them and could not be beaten off. Then when Red Axe returned for a visit, the Crows thought he was going to stay and lead them once more. They had a great celebration, but they were in despair when Red Axe told them that his stay was only temporary. Rather than let him go back to the white men, they poisoned him, thinking that his spirit at least would linger about the place of his death and strengthen them somewhat.'

'Then Wolf Bear really means —'

'He really means that we are prisoners among the Crows.'

CHAPTER XIV

THE PLATEAU

Land of the buffalo wallow,
Land of the prickly pear,
Hill melting into hollow,
Treeless you are, but fair.

Playground of breeze caressing,
Stretching long miles afar,
Daytime or night a blessing —
Sunshine or blazing star.

Land of the buffalo wallow,
Brown is each hill and swale,
Yet who, of your sons, will follow
Yon outward-leading trail?

From the Wilderness Songs of BAPTISTE BOUCARD

WOLF BEAR was better than his word when it came to fulfilling the promise he had made with regard to trapping. Evidently the Crows had figured that an appeal to the cupidity which, they thought, was part of every white man's nature would be sufficient to keep Iron Hand with them. I said nothing to disabuse them of this idea, knowing that such objection would be useless. It was better to fall in with their plan than to show that we suspected any ulterior motive.

I was not long in learning, however, that the Crows had capitalized their new battle leader, and capitalized him heavily. They let it be known that the conqueror of the dreaded Strikes the

Lance was to dwell among the Crows and they did not neglect to add that he was to fight their battles whenever it was necessary. Friendly Indians — Shoshones and Arapahoes mostly, and a few Crees from the North — drifted in to get a sight of the white man who had slain Strikes the Lance and spoiled the magic of the Sioux medicine man. It was of no avail to advance the simple explanation regarding the armor which Strikes the Lance had worn and which made him impregnable to the attacks of the most skilled fighters among the Indians. A supernatural twist was given to the story. The strong medicine of the Sioux had yielded before a stronger. One wizard had been succeeded by another whose powers of magic were even greater. It was known that I had refused to strip to the waist when fighting — consequently I must be wearing some magic garment more impenetrable than that with which the Sioux had turned so many death-dealing blades.

I had let it be known flatly in the Crow council that I was not to be called upon to do any fighting unless it was absolutely necessary in defense of our position. This was a disappointment to the Crows at first, as they had pictured me as sallying forth at the head of every horse-stealing expedition they sought to organize. But they found that the power of suggestion was doing its work so well that little else was needed. The very sight of

the Crows in the field in these days seemed to be sufficient to scatter their enemies. Small parties of Crow horse-stealers and raiders routed much larger parties of Sioux and Cheyennes. The Crows became arrogant and boastful in proportion to their successes. Scalp dances were of frequent occurrence. The young men came back from long expeditions into the enemy country, driving herds of ponies ahead of them. There was feasting and folly, and, in short, these poor Indians acted just as white men are prone to act in times when there is too much good fortune being passed about.

Apparently it had been laid down as a law that a tithe was to be paid to me for the killing of Strikes the Lance, and never was assessment more generously met. Despite my protests that the tribe owed nothing to us, the piles of dried pelts kept growing near our lodges. Also the women of the village were busy at the tanning, thus completing the work which the hunters had started.

Never have I seen such buffalo robes as were brought in that autumn. All of us took part in the hunting, and even Annabel brought down several of the great beasts, as she had learned how to shoot accurately from the saddle. Baptiste and I were not loath to do our share of the buffalo killing, for we knew that this was the red man's harvest-time, against the winter days to come. Little of the meat was lost, so swiftly and faith-

fully would the Indian women work at the butchering in the wake of the hunters. With their skinning-knives, some of which were heirlooms and greatly prized, the women would chip tiny pieces from the inner side of the dried hide, until sometimes it was reduced to almost incredible thinness and flexibility. The summer hides, which were not so valuable as those taken in the fall, were used for teepees, but those in which we were sharing were intended for trading.

When we were not hunting the buffalo, we were after beaver, a work in which the girl did not take part, though she was always on the trail with us. Though apparently we were in no immediate danger, I was uneasy lest Le Crochet and Abner should find some way of striking at us. I knew The Hook too well to imagine that he had given over pursuit. The gold that I had shaken out on that blanket before his evil eyes no doubt had given him many a restless night, nor would he abandon our trail so long as there was opportunity of forcing the secret from any of us.

Nor did we lack direct evidence that Le Crochet was hanging upon us like a shadow. There was a certain spring, not far from one of the creeks richest in beaver peltry. This bower of rare beauty had greatly appealed to Annabel, and she had visited it frequently. One day she met us on our return from the traps and asked us to look at the place which had so fascinated her.

We followed her along the brown, aromatic carpet made by the pine needles. Entering a natural clearing, semi-circular in form, she pointed to the spring, which made a jewel-like pool at the head of the tiny glade.

At her laughing invitation to drink, I knelt and was about to bring my face to the water, when I noticed, in the mud and moss, the imprint of Le Crochet's misshapen hand. Instantly I covered the imprint with my own hand, but, as I straightened up, after my drink, I knew that my action had not been quick enough.

'You saw?' I asked.

'Yes — Le Crochet has been here.'

She was pale, but her voice was steady. Baptiste and I sought for more marks, but could find none. Later, with the best trailers among the Indians, we searched the surrounding glades and coulees, but not so much as a moccasin track did we find. It was my opinion that Le Crochet had purposely left the imprint of his hand at the spring. He knew that the girl visited the place often. Probably he had seen her there, but realized there was no opportunity of successfully carrying her away, so close was the watch we kept. So he had left a sign, by which we should know that he still kept vigil, and then had taken himself out of the Crow country as silently and mysteriously as he had entered. A crafty and resourceful foe, not to be held lightly!

More carefully than ever we watched the girl, while the trapping went on. And such trapping it was! Never have I seen streams yield so generously of beaver nor the plains give such varied largess in skins of many sorts. It seemed as if one had only to set a trap anywhere on the plateau, and some fur-bearing animal would walk into it. Soon our teepees were surrounded by large piles of peltries. In addition to skins of buffalo and beaver, there were pelts of wolves (including more than fifty white wolves), coyotes, red and gray foxes, badgers and muskrats.

The Indians had been enriching their own stores. Besides great heaps of buffalo robes, tied seventy to a pack, the women had put up more pemmican than the tribe could possibly consume. This was preserved in bladders, holding from five to eight pounds each and selling at that time for fifty cents at any trading-post. Also there were many dried buffalo tongues which were marketable.

At the sight of so much bounty which Nature seemed to shower upon them, the Indians became possessed of the desire to trade. Then men were eager for the whiskey which the traders were only too willing to give them in exchange for valuable furs, and the women were dreaming of the bright beads and other gewgaws with which they were swindled out of their wonderful handiwork.

The nearest trading-post was on the Yellow-

stone at the mouth of the Rosebud — a small post once abandoned, but now conducted by a none too dependable trader named Bonnebouche. Wolf Bear still advanced the plea that it would be dangerous to attempt to get through to Fort Laramie until later in the season, but he could not restrain the growing demand of his people for barter of some sort, so it was given out finally that we were to visit the post on the Rosebud for purposes of trade.

It was late in November when a motley assembly of warriors, women, and children departed for the post. Behind the warriors came dozens of ponies, loaded with the materials which the Indians had collected in their weeks of extraordinary industry. The ponies were kept to the trail by Indian boys, whose daily task was herding and who rode with a skill that was surprising from the time they were able to climb to the back of a horse. Behind the pack-animals came the women, bobbing along ungracefully on their ponies, many of which dragged the travois, in which were bundled household equipment and children indiscriminately. Dogs ran in and out between the feet of the ponies, and from the cavalcade arose a pandemonium of sounds which it seemed to me would carry easily to the land of the dreaded Dacotahs.

There had been little snow during the autumn. The days had been warm, though the cold nights

of the upland had put red and yellow flares on the rosebushes and bullberry-bushes which lined the streams, these growths sometimes reaching a height of ten or twelve feet.

A sorry enough place we found the post, in sharp contrast with the life at Fort Laramie. It was a small place, hardly more than a hundred feet each way, over all. The stockade had been strongly enough built, in accordance with the plan generally followed by the American Fur Company in the construction of all its outposts. But the founder of the post, a strong, able man, who had been successful for years in dealing with the Indians, had been sent into the Blackfoot country, where there was always need of diplomats. His successor, Bonnebouche, plainly had little liking for the part in which he found himself cast — a buffer between the unfriendly Sioux, Crows, and Cheyennes.

Bonnebouche himself surveyed our party through the wicket in the gate. He was a dispirited-looking Frenchman, slight of figure, and deprecatory of voice and gesture when talking with whites and arrogant with Indians.

No sooner had we arrived than our young men began to demand whiskey, which was handed to them, in exchange for pelts, through the wicket in the great gate. In the matter of admitting members of our party, Bonnebouche declared that only Baptiste, Annabel, and myself might

enter, as he whined out a long tale of being without help of any sort and disinclined to take any chances with drunken Indians.

‘And I’ll have to take your guns and lock them in the office,’ he concluded. ‘It’s a rule that all must obey or stay out of the post. *Sacré!* such a country for fights. Men of the trail come here, and, instead of being glad to see one another, after so much loneliness, they’re at each other’s throats before they’ve had half a dozen drinks. Taking their weapons at the wicket is the only safe plan.’

I was not desirous of making our camp outside with the Indians, for I knew that, in case of an attack by any party of hostile savages, the first volley would go into the Crow lodges, which were already being put up in a swale by the northern wall of the post. I was none too willing to give up our weapons, but it looked the better way out of the situation, so Baptiste and I handed over our rifles and hunting-knives and Bonnebouche locked them in the office which was on the second floor adjoining his own room. This he gave up, graciously enough, to Annabel. It was a scantily furnished room, with a window looking out on the Crow camp and a door leading to a small balcony, where a flight of wooden stairs led downward to the main hallway. Immediately to the left of the foot of the stairway was a combined dining-room and living-room, with a fireplace, where Bonnebouche entertained such guests as came to this

unattractive place. Across the hallway was another door leading to a combination bar and pharmacy, where Bonnebouche, who claimed to have been a master pharmacist in Canada, mixed drugs and liquors — sometimes, from the taste of the latter, without being too particular about washing his glasses free from all traces of his medicines.

Bonnebouche assigned Baptiste and myself quarters across the hall from the room which Annabel was to occupy, and following this disposal of sleeping accommodations, which was brought about only by the payment of an extortionate price, we went to have a part in the bartering, which was carried on at the front gate.

Bonnebouche made his offers for the peltries, and the skins were tossed through the wicket as soon as a price was agreed upon. The trader's prices were fair enough in the main, and he hastened his work by letting it be known at the outset that there would be little haggling. Also his work was simplified by the fact that most of the Indians wanted whiskey. Wolf Bear stood sadly by while many of his young men drank themselves into a stupor. I had seen the same thing take place many times, and I relished it no more with repetition.

It was not long until the Indians' hoardings of pelts and buffalo meat were inside the compound, and the Crows had more of beads and colored

cloths and fripperies in general, to say nothing of whiskey, than the tribe had known for a long time. We had left our own packs until the last, and, knowing the full value of what we had in hand, we gave Bonnebouche an afternoon of bargaining which was not altogether pleasant for him.

'*Sacré!* but you are hard enough drivers,' he growled, as he made out an IOU against the company for the total amount due us — something which amazed Wolf Bear, who could not understand how a mere slip of paper bearing a few indistinguishable marks should be the equivalent of a pile of furs such as we had just turned over to the trader.

'We know something of what these furs will bring on the wharves of St. Louis,' observed Baptiste, 'but what we know best of all, Brother Bonnebouche, is that we have risked our lives in getting some of these pelts — and is not risking a man's life worth some return?'

'For the matter of that, no man is safe in this country — not even when he is between four walls, as I am,' burst out the trader. And then, glad of a chance to tell the troubles that weighed upon him, he went on at great length telling how desperate had become his plight at this post, with unfriendly tribes pressing each other from all directions, and none of them looking with too great favor on the white men. Things had grown

so bad, he said, that there was hardly a night, when there were Indians camped about, that some one did not fire through the gate, hoping to hit him or some of his men. The post was in bad condition, and his means of defense most meager, yet he could do nothing to remedy matters until the company's first boat arrived in the spring, when he intended to leave.

Nor could I forbear sympathizing with him to a degree, for I knew what these traders in general had to face. They had to put up with the vagaries of Indians and white men. Trappers, who knew no means of arbitrament but the gun, came in with real or fancied grievances. Indians, crazed by whiskey, or perhaps desirous of accomplishing some great *coup* which would enable them to outboast their fellows, would shoot through an open gate or window. Yet I have known one of these traders to load a sledge with whiskey and other supplies in the dead of winter and visit a camp of none too friendly Indians, far from the trading-post, in order to secure robes that might otherwise pass to a rival.

Bonnebouche was typical of his class. He would dare great dangers when his sense of cupidity was aroused, and would risk his life for a pile of pelts, but the adventuring on the lonely trails that stretched from his trading-post made no appeal to him. He could see no sense in our wanderings under arms, and advised us to take what profits

we had made and settle down where there were no dangers.

'She is a dangerous mistress to have, this wilderness,' said Bonnebouche. 'She is fascinating, I admit, or she would not have such a hold on men like yourselves. But of what use is it to look on beauty when perhaps the next moment you die — eh, comrades?'

'Trade has withered the best in your soul, Bonnebouche,' said Baptiste. 'This tall stockade shuts off your mental, as well as your physical, vision.'

Whilst we were talking thus, there came a call from the lookout at one of the bastions beside the main gate. Accompanying the trader, as he hurried forth, we looked out across the stockade, and saw a party of Sioux approaching from the eastward. There were men, women, and children in the party, which was about as large as our own delegation of Crows and evidently had come for purposes of trade.

In the lead, among the Sioux warriors, we could descry Le Crochet and Abner, with six or eight of Blanchard's followers from the wagon-train.

Bonnebouche rushed down to make doubly sure that no Indians were to be admitted past the gate, while Baptiste and I gave not less hurried consideration to our own situation.

'Shall we join the Crows and take our chances with them?' asked Baptiste, the uppermost

thought with both of us being the safety of the girl Annabel.

'I believe not, for that will be certain to lead to an attack at once, and many of the Crows are in no condition to fight. I think the best plan is to wait here. Bonnebouche will admit none but the white men, and the odds against us will not be insurmountable.'

Then, having made our decision, we went back to tell the girl and await the coming of our enemies.

CHAPTER XV

TRADING-POSTS, among the plains tribes generally were looked upon as neutral ground. I have seen delegations from unfriendly tribes openly trading at the same post, with their camps separated only by the stockade. This was what happened in our case. The Sioux at once began putting up their lodges. The excitement in the Crow camp had died down as soon as it was seen that the party approaching was not out for war. There was neither quarreling nor fraternizing — only a haughty aloofness in which even the dogs of the two camps shared.

Le Crochet, Abner, and the rest of the white men in the party, together with the Sioux leaders, parleyed at the gate regarding entry. Le Crochet was violent in his denunciation of Bonnebouche because of the trader's insistence that all firearms be surrendered by those entering the post.

Le Crochet must have felt that we were in the fort, instead of being in the Crow camp, for his face was thrust close to the wicket, and his eyes searched every part of the compound. But from the deep shadows in the trader's living-room we could see without being seen.

Finally the guns and knives were handed through. Not content with accepting what the

visitors had pleased to give him, Bonnebouche, acting in accordance with the teachings of long experience, insisted on admitting one man at a time and searching each individual as he stepped within the compound. This precaution proved its own justification, when Bonnebouche took a hunting-knife from each man, besides a small, silver-mounted rifle of exquisite workmanship which was taken from beneath Le Crochet's buckskin jacket. It was a child's weapon, and no doubt the renegade had taken it as part of his share from a wagon-train which he had helped the Sioux attack and rob.

Bonnebouche stamped angrily to his office to lock the weapons therein, grumbling as he went.

'It's getting so that a man's word in this country is no longer good,' he complained. 'A few years ago it was different, but now there's no standard of honor. Some rascal will smuggle weapons in here yet, and that will be the end of all of us.'

While Bonnebouche was locking the weapons with the others he had taken, Le Crochet and Abner approached the office, with their followers close behind. I do not think Abner had the slightest inkling of our presence, but Le Crochet, with that sixth sense which is the gift of the real trapper, had some forewarning, as he flung the door open hastily and then sidled quickly into the room, gazing about it, with his hawk's eyes,

for possible enemies and with his hands searching unconsciously for weapons which were not there.

When he saw us sitting on rude settees, on either side of the fireplace, Baptiste and the girl together, a look of satisfaction stole over Le Crochet's face, though he made no comment.

Abner's mingled emotions, as he saw us, were reflected comically enough in his face. Hardly a look he bestowed on Baptiste and myself, however, his gaze being all for Annabel. Whatever fear the girl may have felt at looking on this pair was well hidden. Perhaps it was due to the rough schooling in adventure that had come to her since her fortune had been cast with ours. Whatever the reason, she was calm enough, even when Abner began to shower her with reproaches. Baptiste would have risen and been at the emigrant's throat in an instant, but I motioned to him to sit quiet.

'This would be glad news for your good uncle if he could know that I have found you!' exclaimed Abner. 'When I left him at Fort Laramie, he was on a sick-bed — brought there by your ingratitude. But his only words were for me to find you and bring you back to him.'

As he spoke, Abner seized the girl's wrist, but she wrenched herself away, with a strength that plainly surprised him.

'I am sorry if my uncle is ill, as you say,' she replied, 'but, Abner, he should have sent a better

messenger. You have proved a cheat and a villain. You flung off your mask of hypocrisy too soon. As for your religion, I have heard, and I believe, that you and these ruffians with you are not Mormons, but are simply using the name to hide your schemes of rascality.'

Abner recoiled before the girl's intensity of voice and expression. The shot about his pretended Mormonism hurt him the worst, for he began to sputter indignant denials, in which he was joined by his followers, six in number, who had crowded in after Le Crochet.

'If you have, indeed, come with a message from my uncle,' went on the girl, 'you may take this word back to him — that when I return it will be when I am free in my own right and he will have no further claim over me as a guardian. I still love him and honor him, but his fanaticism, which would have put me in your hands, has absolved me from any duty in the matter of obedience.'

Neither Baptiste nor I had uttered a word, being content to let the girl take Abner in hand, which she appeared well capable of doing. The emigrant seemed to have lost all command of words at the spirit shown by this young woman, who apparently had been meekness itself during the long journey on the trail. He floundered about so long in trying to make reply that at last Le Crochet laughed jeeringly.

'*Sacré bleu!*' exclaimed the trapper. 'You mumble your jaws like a wolf that thought to pick up a badger and found it a porcupine. But I never have been able to see why men should fall out over women, white or red. What say all of you, now that we are here, with a dull night ahead of us, if we try the cards? And old Bonnebouche, here, has some good liquor under lock and key. Hey, robber of Indians — what say you?'

Bonnebouche, who had slipped into the room last of all, and who apparently had been in some trepidation over the prospects of an encounter, welcomed any suggestion that would save conflict. His face took on the first semblance of a smile it had worn since we arrived at the post, and he summoned his chief clerk, from the task of tallying pelts, to help bring liquor from a private stock in the trader's office.

I had no doubt that the thought of the golden sandbar had never left Le Crochet's mind for an instant. He had failed in his efforts to get the Sioux to overrun the Crow country. Also he was finding that my unexpected elimination of Strikes the Lance had made the Sioux wary of any sort of engagement with the Crows. The hands of his allies had been weakened, and now he must depend more upon his own resources. The opportunity was not so attractive as it might have been, even with eight men against our two, as it was plain that Le Crochet did not place much faith in

the fighting ability of Abner and his fellow emigrants. I could fairly follow the working of the trapper's mind, as I watched him from my bench. His call for cards was a bid for time. I knew that much, as plainly as if he had told me in so many words.

'What about it, Crews?' urged Le Crochet. 'Is a social game of cards agreeable to you?'

'A game for stakes, yes,' I answered slowly, as all looked at me. 'But I play no social games with renegades who take the trail with the cut-throat Sioux.'

Le Crochet's frown deepened, as did the growl in his voice.

'Call it what you please, as long as there's play,' he said. 'Some day you and I, Crews, will have a hand, with every one else dropped out of the game.'

I laughed, and I believe Le Crochet would have flung himself upon me had not Bonnebouche entered, bringing the liquor and uttering loud protests as he caught our concluding words.

'Will nothing stop this fighting, even when I take the weapons from those who come here?' fairly howled the trader. 'Think of the fine, broad country there is all about here, where men may settle such differences as you trappers seem to have. And yet all bad blood must be spilled at this post. Here is some of the oldest liquor that ever found its way into a new country. If that won't improve your tempers, then they're past mending.'

There was a scraping of benches and clattering of chairs as the company drew up to the long table. Abner's followers, all heavy-set, unshaven, disagreeable-looking fellows of a type that one could pick by hundreds from the emigrant trains, were eager enough for the play and the cards, but it was plainly seen that Abner himself had little heart for the entertainment provided. His gaze was riveted on Annabel, who sat looking into the firelight. Once or twice he made as if to speak to her, but her attitude of deep abstraction kept him at a distance. Nor did he muster up courage when she rose and left the room, without so much as a glance at the company at the card table.

The door at the foot of the stairs was open, and so was the door across the hall, leading to Bonnebouche's 'pharmacy.' I saw the girl go through the open doorway and turn toward the stairs, without a look backward into the room she had just quitted. Through the haze of tobacco smoke that poured out of our doorway, I could see into the room across the hall, though dimly. There was a rattling of bottles and glasses from that room, and Bonnebouche was moving about among his vile-smelling drugs, though I could descry only a part of his body.

Then Le Crochet leaped to his feet and closed the door, and, returning to the table, pounded thereon with his maimed hand and shouted that the game was to begin.

CHAPTER XVI

CARDS, being something which one could carry to the uttermost campfire, were the chief source of amusement for the wilderness men. Every man who followed the traps on either side of the yellow Missouri and the crystal Yellowstone, was versed, according to his gifts, in poker, seven-up, and euchre. Often they played until they were 'in, hoss and beaver,' which was their way of expressing that all their worldly possessions had gone, and then they were off along dim trails to find a new stake for further gaming.

The fading afternoon light that came in from the two dingy windows facing the compound was met by the red glow from the fireplace. Many of our own bundles of peltry, and part of those which Le Crochet and his followers had brought with them, were scattered about the room. Buffalo robes and bear hides were flung about on the floor and draped on the benches on which we sat. Smoke puffed from the fireplace occasionally, with the varying of the wind, and rolled along the blackened ceiling, mingling with the wreaths from our tobacco. Every man was dressed in buckskin, fringed according to the custom of the time. Some of these garments, particularly those of Abner's men, had seen much service without cleaning.

There was not a man whose hair did not hang to his shoulders. Some gave their locks scant attention, and let them hang, matted and unkempt, about the greasy collars of their hunting-jackets. Others, like Baptiste, kept their hair neatly combed.

Le Crochet, whose hair was black and straight as an Indian's, loomed like a grizzly beside the others of his party. He sat, with his great bulk sprawled half across the table, the play of the shadows bringing out all the saturninity of his features. Despite his maimed hand, he shuffled and dealt the cards with amazing celerity. He was a gamester by nature and played best when the stakes were greatest. This day I knew Le Crochet to be playing for more than the mere furs which figured in the bidding. The stake which he hoped to gain before he quitted the trading-post was the secret of that sandbar of gold.

Le Crochet and those with him were not slow in making inroads upon Bonnebouche's liquor. The bottle had scarcely begun to pass till a note in Abner's laughter convinced me that he was soon fuddled by drink. But Le Crochet was one on whom liquor seemed to have little effect. Baptiste and I drank sparingly.

As the play proceeded, I felt that I was being regarded with many glances of hatred. Abner's followers, I knew, had no love for me because I had done for one of their companions when I had

taken Annabel from their wagon-train. Also, had it not been for my interference in their leader's plans, they would have gone on to Salt Lake and would have been spared all this journeying with the Sioux, which must have cost them much hardship. There was not a man in the company who did not hold me responsible for some injury. Deepest of all was Abner's hatred which he had increasing difficulty in concealing as Bonnebouche's liquor took hold.

The luck of the game was with Baptiste from the start. It usually was, for I remembered his seemingly uncanny fortune at many camp-fire games, where he took possession of nearly everything valuable and then laughingly gave the players enough to make a new stake. Apparently he was careless of the winnings which now came to him. Nor was he disturbed at the oaths and the veiled sneers which Le Crochet and Abner's men began to exchange as the play went steadily against them.

Apparently solicitous over the failure of Baptiste and myself to drink deeply enough, Bonnebouche said:

'*Sacré!* but these trappers are getting a finicking appetite nowadays. Time was when they would toss off anything that looked like liquor, even if it smoked in the glass. If you fellows will have none of the stuff of my choosing, I can bring you something which may be more to your fancy — some-

thing from a little keg that was left here by an Englishman who was out here hunting buffaloes last spring. A titled fellow he was, but when his horse stepped in a badger hole and threw his rider in front of a charging buffalo, the title did him little good. *Mon Dieu!* but he was strewn about the prairie like a ball of rags.'

'There should be a law making every tender-foot bring a keg with him into this country,' said Le Crochet. 'Instead, they're coming in with prayer-books and expecting a welcome.'

Bonnebouche went out, cackling as he departed. This time he closed the door into his pharmaceutical workshop, and again I could hear the clinking of glass on glass. He was gone but a short time, and when he came back it was with a tray, and with the liquor neatly poured into glasses, which he set before us individually. Neither Baptiste nor I touched ours, though Le Crochet and the others drained their glasses at once, and exclaimed at the excellence of the liquor.

It struck me as peculiar that one so lazy and usually scant of ceremonious regard as the trader should go to the trouble of pouring out each man's drink, but the thought came that perhaps such rare consideration was due to the value and choiceness of the liquor.

Before I had touched my glass, however, the door swung open, and Annabel entered the room. She went to the fireplace, and looked about for a

scarf which apparently she had left on the bench she had occupied. I went to assist her in the search, as it occurred to me that there was some other reason for the girl's return.

As she flung the scarf about her shoulders, the girl thrust a note into my outstretched hand. Then, without a glance at the players at the table, she departed as lightly as she had come.

Under pretense of turning over the log in the fireplace, I bent down in the red glow and read the note, which said:

Watch Bonnebouche. I suspected him, and came down the stairs, where I could look into the room across the hall. I saw him pour a powder into the glasses.

Fool that I was! I had seen the trader mixing the drug and had not wit enough to suspect.

Thrusting the note into the fire, I turned once more to the table, but saw that Baptiste had emptied his glass.

Bonnebouche stood in the doorway, pale and ill at ease, his glances traveling from Le Crochet to Baptiste and then to myself. It was clear enough to me now that Le Crochet had reached some understanding with the trader. While Bonnebouche could not come out openly against us, no doubt he had agreed to find some subtler way of betraying us. Probably his natural cowardice had been overcome by his cupidity, Le Crochet promising him a share of gold when

the secret of the El Dorado had been wrested from us.

Striding over to the table, I clapped my hand on Baptiste's shoulder and said:

'This game has gone far enough. It is time for us to go.'

To my surprise, Baptiste's shoulder sagged under my blow. His head wagged drunkenly over the table, and when he looked up at me it was with dimmed intelligence in his eyes, and his smile was that of a man who is on the verge of unnatural sleep.

'Who says anything about going, without giving us a chance to make up our losses?' snarled Le Crochet, rising. 'You have done little betting in this game, Crews. Now let your partner play on alone.'

Baptiste had slouched against me, heavy with sleep. In a few moments more he would be helpless.

Putting my hand under the heavy table, I flung it up-end, cards and glasses dancing down the incline as Le Crochet and those on either side of him tried vainly to get out of the way. There was a tremendous crash, and all went to the floor.

Catching Baptiste about the waist with one arm, I dragged him toward the door. The burliest of Abner's followers I managed to send sprawling with a blow from my free hand, and fortunately he fell atop of those who were trying to get from

under the overturned table. Their hands clutched at me as I made my way to the door, but I kicked free. One who had half risen was doubled up with a blow from my knee.

Le Crochet, fortunately enough, had so fallen that he was the last to untangle himself. The others, as they got to their feet, were somewhat wary of coming to close quarters with me, even though I was handicapped by the weight of Baptiste, who could make but a sad attempt at keeping his feet.

I reached the doorway in some fashion, and was backing toward the stairs before they were all upon me. Releasing my hold on Baptiste, I told him to crawl up the stairs, which he started to do clumsily enough. I could see the frightened face of the girl at the stair top.

With both arms free, and my weight behind them, I planted some blows indiscriminately on midribs and jaws of those who led the pack, and they surged back against Le Crochet. By the time they had recovered for another charge, I was halfway up the stairs.

Not more than two could come abreast up the narrow stairway, and the men hesitated. I have seen the same hesitation grip a wolf pack momentarily, when there was no chance of hanging on the flanks of a wounded bison.

'Coyotes!' yelled Le Crochet. 'Are you going to let Big Tom's slayer get away?'

‘No!’ answered the burly rascal whom I had flung down at the outset of the *mêlée*. ‘We’ll make him suffer for cracking Big Tom’s neck. One rush and we’ll have him, boys.’

The stairs shook and swayed beneath the onslaught of many feet. The burly fellow and an emigrant companion came first, and behind them was Le Crochet, his hooked hand thrust toward me over the leaders’ shoulders. Behind those three came the rest, though Bonnebouche remained discreetly below, bobbing his head about anxiously, to see how the tide of battle went.

Baptiste recovered himself far enough to loose himself from my clasp and stagger up two or three steps, unaided. Then he pitched forward, senseless, just before he reached the upper landing. I had no time to turn and drag him the rest of the way up the stairs. Standing, with my feet astride Baptiste, I fought the leaders as best I could. But they were warmed to the work, and they came back after every blow, seeking to clutch me and drag me to the bottom of the stairs.

As I fought thus, I saw the moccasined feet of Baptiste slowly disappear, and it came to me in a flash that the girl had taken him by the shoulders, and, with strength that I had not dreamed she possessed, was hauling him to the landing.

Freed from any further care of Baptiste, I was enabled to fight to better advantage. A blow in the face of one of the emigrants sent him back

against Le Crochet. The mass of attackers behind them gave under the weight of both men and sagged backward a matter of several steps. Seizing the other leader by the collar of his deer-skin jacket with both hands, I swung him off his feet and tossed him over the rail. The whole building seemed to shake with the impact as he struck the floor.

Almost instinctively, as I grasped the rail, over which I had tossed this rascal, it came to me that here was the weapon I had sought. It was a stout sapling, some three or four inches in thickness. It joined another sapling of equal thickness, in the middle of the stairway, and together they made a rude baluster.

Putting my forearm under the upper sapling, I ripped the rail from its supporting posts. With this in my hands, I backed up the stairs slowly until I had reached the landing.

Le Crochet and the others had dashed upward again, but the sight of this stout piece of timber in my hand caused them to hesitate a moment.

This hesitation, brief as it was, proved sufficient for my purpose. Thrusting the heavy end of the sapling between the stairs and the log wall, I threw my weight against the lever thus improvised. When the attackers saw my purpose, they came on with a rush, but too late.

There was a splintering sound as the stairs were ripped away from the side wall and the upper

landing. Then, as I gave a final pull, with all my strength, there was a crash as wood and nails parted and the stairs fell, with their heavy burden.

Leaning over the edge of the landing, I could see a confused mass of legs and arms below me. One or two of the attackers were stunned, and the big emigrant whom I had tossed over the rail was crying that his arm was broken. Through the din I could catch the oaths of Le Crochet, as he cursed the clumsy fellows who had prevented his coming to grips with me.

Turning, I saw the girl, seated on the landing-floor, with Baptiste's head in her lap. She had brought a basin of water and was bathing his forehead. His eyes were open, but he was still dazed, from the effect of the drug.

Those below were shouting a confusion of orders and directions. Bonnebouche was explaining that he had no ladder. Le Crochet was for putting the stairs back against the landing and trying another rush. Resolved to settle that idea before it had gone further, I went to Bonnebouche's office and put my shoulder against the door, sending it inwards with the lock broken. Then I chose our weapons from among those in the room and went back with them to the edge of the landing. Calling to Le Crochet, I said:

'I have our rifles here, as you see, and an arsenal at my back. If any of you attempt to raise those stairs in place again, you are dead men!'

They saw how things had gone against them, and there was a rush for the compound, that they might get to the Sioux camp and secure weapons there. Meantime I could hear Wolf Bear calling to us from outside the window at our backs. The Crows had heard the fight in the post, as it had been on the side near their camp. Looking out of the window, I saw Wolf Bear and most of his warriors, and told them to remain below until we joined them.

Then, by means of converting bedding into ropes, which were lashed first about the body of the still helpless Baptiste and then about the girl, I soon had both lowered to the waiting Indians. Fastening the improvised rope securely to the window frame, I slid down, with our rifles, but not until I had called to Bonnebouche from the landing and told him that his treachery was known to us and that he had best not delay his return to Canada and to count himself lucky that a bullet did not cut short his protestations of innocence.

Then we rode away with the Crows, as soon as they could break camp, and the Sioux, with Le Crochet and Abner and their white followers, rode in the opposite direction, for both parties were about equal in strength and the outcome of a battle would have been uncertain. Also, with women and children along, neither side chose to hazard a meeting.

‘Perdition!’ exclaimed Baptiste, swaying drunkenly in the saddle as we rode away. ‘Never before have I met an enemy who used drugs as a weapon — and never have I had such a headache.’

CHAPTER XVII

WE had been not more than a week in camp, after our return from the trading-post on the Rosebud, when smallpox broke out among the Crows.

I knew too well what such a visitation meant, as I had seen whole villages deserted, perhaps an entire tribe having been cut down by this disease which the Indians ascribed to a mysterious and dreaded Spotted Demon.

The emigrants who were widening and deepening the great trails across the continent were bringing with them some knowledge of civilization. At Fort Laramie, both Baptiste and I had been vaccinated by an army surgeon, hence, to the wonder of the Indians, we had walked through stricken villages and had brought some measure of relief to victims who had been abandoned to their fate.

An unusual commotion in a lodge caught my attention when I was returning from a meeting with Wolf Bear and his subordinates, where I had received only the usual vague and unsatisfactory replies to my demand for an escort to Fort Laramie.

Pushing aside the flap of the teepee, I entered without ceremony, according to Indian custom. It was the lodge of the chief medicine man of the

tribe, Charge the Enemy (Eskoche). Dismal enough the place appeared. Several great buffalo heads were scattered about the lodge. To the rattling of a gourd and the beating of a tom-tom, the medicine man, who was painted with all the barbaric art at his command, bent over the sufferer, the wife of one of the leading men of the tribe. One look at the woman's face convinced me that the end was near for her, the disease being in its final stage. Nor was there any telling how many other members of the tribe had been infected, for isolation was never practiced by these simple people.

The howlings of Eskoche increased to frenzy as I entered. Fiercely beating the tom-tom and again shaking the gourd, which rattled with the sound of hail in a forest, he danced back and forth between me and the bed of the sufferer. Evidently he was creating a magic barrier, to keep the evil influence of the white man away from the woman.

Something in the malevolence of the medicine man's voice and gesture disturbed me. I knew the power of these men, particularly in times of pestilence, such as now menaced the tribe. Ordinarily the word of the chieftain was supreme, but when terror and superstition gripped the tribespeople, the medicine men came into power. They fed the popular imagination with their weird prophecies and the control of the chiefs

became weakened. Superstition reigned, and the crude but effective law and order which had grown out of tribal experience was lost in the chaos of ignorance.

The men who wielded this power were always jealous of their position. They were restive under the duly chosen chieftains and were constantly testing the strength of such leaders.

Owing to the plainly evidenced enmity of Eskoche, who kept between me and the dying woman, I could not render any assistance and was compelled to leave the victim to her fate. Within a few days the disease had become epidemic. It seemed to leap from lodge to lodge, slaying old and young.

I have heard of heroism displayed by men under all circumstances, yet I have never known of greater fortitude than these people displayed in their hour of chastisement. Many warriors, when they felt the approach of the disease, dug their own graves, that so much of a burden might be spared their relatives. Then, in full war regalia, they would stand before the graves they had dug, and plunge knives into their own bosoms. Their faithful squaws would cover them over with earth, perhaps to die themselves a few days later.

Men would rush from their lodges to the river and drown themselves. Children were buried, not singly, but in whole families. Day and night

alike were made hideous with the wailing of bereaved relatives.

We did as much as we could to help those who were being stricken on every hand. I speak in a collective sense, but in reality the girl accomplished far more than Baptiste and I together. Without the slightest indication of fear, she kept vigil in the lodges where the disease raged at its worst. Under her ministering touch many women and children were saved from the death which was thought to be inevitable.

As the disease waxed, the ascendancy of the medicine man over the tribe became greater. Also it became correspondingly difficult for us to work, for, playing upon the superstition and fear of these credulous people, the medicine man began to oppose us. Jealous of the good that had been wrought, particularly by Annabel, he warned the tribes-folk against us.

Our first intimation of the opposition of the medicine man came from Wolf Bear. The chief was saddened beyond mere words at the havoc wrought by the pestilence. But he was less in the thrall of the medicine man than most of the others of the tribe, because he had come in frequent contact with civilization and knew, even though it might be faintly, of the results the white men were accomplishing in their way of fighting disease.

‘John Crews and his friends have helped our

people much, but there is one who will not have it so,' said the chief after he had summoned me to his lodge and had sat long in silence.

'You mean Eskoche?'

'Yes. Eskoche is a powerful medicine man — more powerful than any other who has risen among our people.'

I waited for further enlightenment. Then the chief spoke slowly, as one who regrets the words that must be said.

'Eskoche is angry at the white girl in particular for the work she has done among the Crows. He says she is an evil spirit and must go — that you are all followers of the Spotted Demon and bear his mark.'

'How do we bear the mark of the Spotted Demon?' I asked, mystified.

'The white mark on the left arms of Iron Hand and his friends.'

Then I remembered that, in order to make it clear to an Indian woman how it could be possible to walk amid such scenes of pestilence with scant fear of being stricken, Annabel had rolled back her sleeve and had shown the vaccination mark on her left arm.

This had gone from lodge to lodge, in the fashion of Indian gossip, and the medicine man had not been slow to seize upon it as a possible way to remove us. The Indians were told that the mark was that of the Spotted Demon. All three of us

were classed as disciples of the evil being at whose feet all the present troubles of the tribe were laid.

At first, so I learned from Wolf Bear, the medicine man had been content with insinuations. These grew into open denunciation. In his frenzied dancing at the bedside of the dying, Eskoche had included us in his ravings. He had railed against us as the cause of this scourge which had been visited upon the Crow Nation.

All this explained the change that had taken place in the attitude of the Indians of late — the averted looks of the Crow women, who hurried past Annabel with their shawls raised before their faces, as a barrier against her supposed evil influence.

‘What would you advise?’ I asked of Wolf Bear, when he resumed his smoking, thereby indicating that he had laid the entire case before me.

‘It is difficult for me to say,’ replied the chief slowly. ‘If all this evil had not smitten the Crows, I could overcome the lies that have been spread by the forked tongue of Eskoche. But, as it is, those lies have increased until they resemble a den of serpents.’

I rose and clasped Wolf Bear’s hand.

‘I know that my friend Wolf Bear cannot say what is in his heart,’ I declared. ‘He feels that it is best for us to leave the camp of the Crows at once, yet he cannot bring himself to tell me so.’

Wolf Bear bowed his head in assent and stood silent as I turned away.

Not that any of the concern, which I felt as I strode through the camp, was for myself nor for Baptiste. We had come to look upon life with the plainsman's comfortable philosophy, which was comprehended in the declaration that a man's faculties and his stout body were given to him in order that he might care for himself under all circumstances. But all man's comforting self-assurance came to an end when he was given watch and ward over the first woman.

When I told Baptiste what I had gleaned from my talk with Wolf Bear, he agreed with me that it was best for us to go.

'To-day scarcely an Indian would speak to me,' said Baptiste. 'If Eskoche has gained such ascendancy he will find a way of making an end of us soon. We are as good as dead if we stay in this camp another twenty-four hours.'

We called the girl to us, with her eyes still heavy with sleep, as she had flung herself, fully dressed, on her buffalo robes, after a long vigil at the couch of an Indian woman whose faith in her white sister had proved stronger than her belief in the medicine man.

We might have known that nothing could shake the girl's supreme courage. The prospect of being once more turned adrift on that vast prairie sea, which had cast us into such strange

and insecure harbors apparently did not disturb her.

‘I only regret,’ she said, ‘that I must leave these suffering people, who are so much in need of help.’

And in truth the Crow people were in desperate need. Fully a third of the proud nation had died. Countless lodges had been burned, with all the effects of those who had lived therein. This had been done at the instance of Wolf Bear, upon our earnest urging, for we had not found it difficult to convince the chieftain of the danger of keeping infected robes and garments about.

We had cited the case of the Mandans, who had been reduced from several thousands to thirty individuals, all owing to smalipox caught from a blanket that had been stolen from a trading-post on the Missouri. The trader knew the stolen blanket was infected, and he pleaded with the Indians to find the man who had taken it and to isolate him. Also he begged the Indians, most of whom were gone from their village on a hunting trip, to stay away until danger had passed. But such counsel could make little headway against the ignorance of these poor children of the plains. They trooped back to their lodges and soon only a remnant of the tribe survived.

While the case of the Crow tribe was not so bad, it was serious enough to cause grave forebodings on the part of Wolf Bear lest his people

follow the Mandans to extinction. The one remedy that was tried was almost worse than the disease. On the banks of the stream which divided the camp were many sweat-houses, built of buffalo robes thrown over withes set in the ground in semi-circular fashion. The smoke from many fires could be seen as those who were untouched by the disease heated huge stones which were taken into the sweat-houses. Water was then poured over the hot stones. When the sufferer could stand the steam no more, he would rush to the river, on which the ice had formed, and would plunge in. Naturally such a desperate remedy wrought more harm than good. Many a time the one who plunged in remained in the stream — dead from the shock.

The laughter of children was never heard in the camp. No more hunting parties were organized by the men. No young warriors, desirous of advancing themselves in the eyes of their fellows, started forth on horse-stealing expeditions. There were no outposts to warn us of the Sioux. If the hereditary enemies of the Crows had so wished, they might have wiped out the tribe with no resistance. But neither Sioux nor Cheyennes, nor any other tribal foes of the Crow Nation, would approach our camp while it was in the clutch of this common enemy.

The winter was yet open. The rolling hills that stretched toward the mountains were still in

the brown-and-gray mantle that late fall had thrown across their shoulders. But the white caps of the mountain peaks were gradually extending downward. Also there were siftings of snow in the hollows of the plain. But, though the nights had the chill of winter, the days had been warm and dry and flooded with sunshine.

No doubt this warmth and absence of snow had something to do with prolonging the disease in the camp. The mild weather also strengthened the hold of Eskoche, for it enabled the people to dance — their means of expressing every emotion — and at the dances the medicine man could make his most effective mass appeal. It was at one of these dances that the feeling against us flared into open resentment.

I had attended the dance as an onlooker, because I wished to know just what Eskoche was doing and saying. Baptiste remained in our lodge, to keep a watchful eye through the tent flap upon the little teepee occupied by Annabel, for we had decided, as the mutterings against us increased, to leave no opportunity for a stealthy attack.

Wolf Bear had promised to send us, in case of need, a picked body of old warriors who were high in the councils which I had been attending, and who sided with the chieftain rather than with the superstitious element that had rallied about Eskoche.

The medicine man gave one of the most fren-

zied exhibitions of dancing that I had ever seen. His moccasined feet seemed to shake the earth with their stamping. He was a giant of a man — almost as large as myself. In his garment of coyote-skins, with the tails dangling, and with the skins of serpents floating about him like ribbons and his eyes and teeth flashing in the firelight, beneath a clumsy headdress from which the horns of a buffalo projected, he was a sight to terrorize one unaccustomed to Indian ways. But familiarity with such masquerades had robbed them of any terrors for me. Only I could hear and see that Eskoche was goading the tribe into a condition of mind approaching his own frenzy, and that the paleface interlopers in the camp were being freely blamed for the scourge of disease.

At the height of the dance, Eskoche swung from the firelight and paused in front of me, his feet still stamping in time with the throbbing of the tom-toms. I could hear his breath coming in gasps and could see the heaving of his mighty chest beneath his coyote-skin robe.

In a long, wailing chant, Eskoche accused the white strangers of bringing with them the medicine pouch of the Evil One, from which they had taken the seeds of disease, put in the pouch by the Spotted Demon, and planting those seeds in front of the lodge entrances of the Crow people.

‘Does Iron Hand deny that on his arm is the sign of the Spotted Demon?’ chanted Eskoche.

'There is a mark on my arm,' I said to those who had formed a circle about us, 'but it is not the mark of the Spotted Demon. It is a sign put there to drive the Spotted Demon away.'

'Let us see this mark,' shouted Eskoche.

I strode to the firelight and bared my left arm, and there was the tiny white spot which seemed to hold all the onlookers fascinated, though some in the crowd covered their heads with their blankets, as if they feared to look long upon the work of the Spotted Demon.

Patiently I tried to explain what the vaccination mark meant. I could see that I made no headway. Eskoche was dancing and chanting. He finally called out:

'Are not your trapping brother, the Song-Maker, and the maiden whose voice is like the meadow-lark's, also marked thus by the Spotted Demon?'

'They are marked in this way, but not by the Spotted Demon,' I replied, and once more attempted to explain the working of vaccine, but to no avail. My savage audience could not comprehend the statement in the slightest. Every illness was to them a manifestation of the displeasure of some demon. Outside of their sweat-baths and their incantations, they had no knowledge of possible means of fighting disease. I felt my helplessness as I endeavored to explain the potency of vaccination.

'Can Iron Hand give us the mark that will keep away the Spotted Demon?' shrieked the medicine man.

I tried to explain that the marks could be made only by those who had vaccine. I could see that Eskoche had gained ground and I had lost. Probably there was not one in the tribe — not even Wolf Bear, for all his enlightenment — who would have submitted to vaccination, even had I been equipped to carry it out, but my admission that I could not give them the magic spots which would keep away disease helped Eskoche's case immeasurably.

The murmurs against me grew loud and menacing as I rolled down my sleeve and stepped out of the circle of firelight. As I walked back to our camp, I could hear the voice of the medicine man raised to a shriek of triumph, as he denounced, in the strongest terms, those who had brought woe to the Indian village.

I realized that we must depart from the camp as quickly as possible. The wintry wilderness that stretched about us on every side was not so inhospitable as this once friendly camp where madness now reigned.

CHAPTER XVIII

APATHY had settled upon the camp next morning when we left, under an escort of veteran warriors and sub-chieftains, in charge of Wolf Bear. Otherwise there would have been some attempt to prevent our going. But, fortunately for us, the frenzy of Eskoche's followers had spent itself at the dance the night before.

The medicine man came out of his weirdly painted lodge and hurled curses and prophecies of evil at us as we left. Although Annabel could not understand the import of Eskoche's ravings, there was no mistaking the vindictiveness of his words. The girl shuddered, and put her arm before her eyes to shut out the sight of the gesticulating madman in the camp of death.

But Eskoche's imprecations brought few figures out of the Crow lodges. It was early in the morning, and the sun was just beginning to cast its cold light upon the smoke-browned tops of the Indian teepees. A light snow had fallen during the night and had draped, as in a mantle, the sinister forms that lay about the camp — the frozen bodies which were awaiting burial.

We were quitting a Golgotha, but our hearts were sad, for we knew that in these frail homes were many who needed our aid. Smoke rose from

a few of the lodges, but most of them gave no sign of human activity. The few Indians who came out at Eskoche's summons looked at us in apathy. Now that we had started, they were content to let us go, but had it been known that we were to leave, not all of Wolf Bear's power could have prevailed against tribal superstition.

We did not follow the river, for we knew that if the Sioux were still keeping watch the waterway would be closely guarded. Instead, we struck across the treeless hills which billowed from the foot of the mountain range. Our general direction was to be toward Fort Laramie. Ordinarily I should have had no doubts about reaching the fort, but now, with a woman to be protected, questionings began to assail me. For the first time, the prairie took on a sinister aspect. It was no longer something to be easily overmatched, but sprawled, like a great wrestler with arms outspread, ready to embrace us all in a clutch that meant death.

The same thought had come to my white companions, apparently, for, as I looked back from the head of the column, where I rode with Wolf Bear, I saw that Baptiste and the girl were riding in silence, and the expression on the face of my trapping brother was about as close to concern as I had ever seen there. But it was only momentary on Baptiste's part, for, as he caught my glance, his face brightened and I saw him say

something to the girl which brought a smile to her countenance.

The Indians plodded with us for the better part of half a day. We made no attempt to avoid detection, for we felt that there would be no Sioux so near the infected camp. So our way was made, boldly enough, along the tops of hills and ridges which the wind had cleared of snow.

Our trail was broad, for, besides the ponies we rode, we had several pack-animals, heavily loaded, and one pony dragging a travois on which were our teepees and other cumbersome articles.

'After they have gone one sleep to the south,' said Wolf Bear, 'it will be well for Iron Hand and his friends if they keep to the hollows, and go to the hilltops only when they wish to look around, like the wolf and the coyote. The Sioux will not be where the breath of the Spotted Demon can reach them, but beyond that point there will be danger.'

'Wolf Bear speaks words of wisdom, as always,' I replied. 'It is not the Sioux to be feared as much as Le Crochet and the white men with him, who have no fear of the Spotted Demon. They will not be hiding in the lodges of the Sioux, but will be seeking us on the prairie. We have much to carry, and our trail is broad and will be easy to follow. Still, I have every hope that we shall be able to reach Fort Laramie. There is but one thing that really troubles me.'

The chief looked back at the broad marks left by our travois.

'Iron Hand speaks the truth when he says his trail is broad and will be easy for the Sioux to follow,' he said, 'but probably there will be fresh snows that will cover it, for the skies above the mountains are heavy. But what is this one fear you have spoken about?'

'Ammunition. We have barely enough for the game we shall need to kill.'

Wolf Bear halted the cavalcade and took stock of the ammunition among his warriors. The Crows were still dependent largely upon the bows and lances of their forefathers. There were only three rifles among the warriors who followed us, and not over a dozen rounds of ammunition, which Wolf Bear made the owners give to us.

'It is, indeed, too little for the needs of Iron Hand and his friends,' observed the chief, shaking his head over the total supply.

'Wolf Bear forgets that I have the bow of Strikes the Lance,' I replied, pointing to that great weapon, which projected from one of our packs.

'True,' he agreed. 'A mighty weapon, and Iron Hand uses it well. The Crows will see to it that you have plenty of arrows.'

Thereupon there was a second contribution, this time from the full quivers of the warriors. When it was finished, a great bundle of arrows

had been added to our packs — war arrows with tiny, loosely fastened heads of flint, and broad, heavy arrows for hunting. For the Indians had long ago learned that a small arrowhead, with greater penetrating power, which would become detached when the shaft was plucked from a wound, would deal more permanent injury than an arrow with a larger head more securely fastened to the shaft. The arrows which had been given us represented countless hours of patient work in the flint quarries, where the Indian arrow-makers toiled with a patience incredible to white men. Yet they were as carelessly given as if they were the merest baubles, such being the way of the Indian with gifts. . . .

The Crows left us about noon, when we had reached a ridge which served as a watershed for illimitable miles of prairie. The broad trail which we had left could be distinguished far behind us, but the way across which we were to go was trackless.

Wolf Bear and his warriors shook hands with us solemnly at parting.

‘Wolf Bear’s heart is grieved that Iron Hand and his friends must leave us in this way,’ said the chieftain. ‘The Crow people are in the wrong, but they are not themselves, for the fear of this Spotted Demon drives all else from their minds.’

We said our good-byes and then Wolf Bear led his warriors down the slope, over the route which

we had just traveled. Nor did we stand and look after them long, but struck forward at as sharp a pace as we could manage.

We had more equipment than I liked to carry, but I could not see where anything could be dispensed with, under the circumstances. Baptiste and I had wintered more than one season in the mountains, with the scantest of covering and only wild game for food and not so much as salt with which to savor it, but two men alone, who are experienced, can shift against great odds in the open, but with a third person along, and that person a woman, all the aspect of their venture is changed. The same thoughts were in Baptiste's mind, but neither of us gave any hint to the girl, by word or expression, that we had anything but the utmost confidence in the good outcome of our forced journey.

The afternoon went uneventfully enough — even pleasantly. Had we been elsewhere than in a wintry desert, with savage foemen in front of us and superstition banishing us from the lodges of the only friends we might claim, the ride would have been something that both Baptiste and I should have welcomed joyously.

While the sun was yet high, we ate a meal such as any person might have enjoyed, even in one of those magnificent hotel dining-rooms at St. Louis, of which I had heard wealthy travelers tell. Over a sagebrush fire I broiled a steak from

an antelope which I had shot from the trail. Also I made some cakes, though I was disheartened at our small supply of flour. I knew that we should find no lack of game, for the plateau was overrun with wild creatures, but I dreaded lest we should have to subsist too long without flour, as I knew the evil effects of a diet of overmuch flesh.

During the afternoon we had ridden in single file, after the manner of Indians, with the trail-choosing left to me by common consent and the girl riding immediately behind me, Baptiste speeding up the lagging pack-animals. Conversation between us, under such circumstances, was necessarily limited. But after we had made camp, and the small teepees of buffalo hide had been taken from the travois and set up, we sat at the camp-fire until the sun poised above the serrated edges of the mountain range, ready for the final plunge into night, and the plateau grew cold.

Baptiste and the girl sang many songs in French and English, while I smoked. Of French I had enough patter to get the drift of the songs, but I liked particularly some English ballads which the girl had learned in Virginia and which she said had come in with the colonists. One in particular, 'Barbara Allen,' I could hear again and again. I even managed to join in the words, in rumbling fashion, at which Baptiste laughed immoderately.

‘Here is magic, indeed!’ he said to the girl, wiping his eyes after his laughter had subsided. ‘For years I have heard that big voice growling commands, or, at the mildest, disputing my pet assertions, but never before have I heard it in song. What spell have you cast over him, to set John Crews to singing ballads?’

The question was lightly enough put and lightly answered, yet it opened some source of understanding which hitherto had remained closed. I realized, as I watched the girl in the firelight singing her ballads, that my love for her had grown fairly to overmastering proportions, and I saw that Baptiste was eaten by the same fever. She had, indeed, cast a spell, not over me alone, but over my trail comrade likewise. Yet, if she knew what power was hers, she gave no sign. . . . Her good-night to us, as she entered her tent, was as frank and impartial as a child’s.

Baptiste sat staring long into the fire — the last that we could burn with no fear of enemies. Our thoughts were unbroken, even when one of us rose to put on a fresh supply of fuel. Baptiste’s face had taken on an unusually sad expression. I noticed that there were hollows in his cheeks which I had never seen before. His deerskin jacket hung more loosely about his shoulders than was its wont. Then I realized what internal fires had been consuming the man. I put my hand on his shoulder.

‘Baptiste,’ I said, ‘you are a poet. You can love more deeply than a clod-brain such as I. Both of us love this girl, but your love must mean more to her than mine. Consider that I am out of the trail — that the way is clear for you.’

Baptiste’s bronzed face was white in the firelight. He clasped my hand until even my big bones cracked under his grip and the blood throbbed in my finger-tips.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Your love alone is strong enough to be worthy of her. She should be yours. I had not meant to show that I loved her.’

As we stood thus in the firelight, shaken by emotions which were new and strange to men like ourselves, unused even to the sight of women, the entrance to the girl’s teepee parted and she came toward us.

She was fully dressed, though her hair was unbound and rippled to her waist in curls that caught every gleam of the fire-glow.

‘I heard my name,’ she said, ‘and I take it that you two would have me decide something in dispute.’

She spoke lightly, and smiled as her words came, but I could see by the glance that she gave us that she was not a little concerned.

‘That we do,’ I said finally, though it was hard for me to speak. As for Baptiste, his customary readiness of tongue had deserted him and he stood silent, nor offered to pull me out of the bog in which I floundered.

‘This thing we would have you decide,’ I went on finally, ‘might relate to three persons anywhere. We were discussing the case of a young woman, loved most desperately by two men.’

She fell in with my detached imagery, though she knew, of course, that we were talking of her.

‘First about this woman,’ she said. ‘Is she worthy of the love of one man — let alone two?’

‘Yes,’ said I. ‘A most worthy woman. One who has many gifts, including courage.’

‘Truly she needs courage, if two men are declaring their love for her.’

‘They have not declared their love. They would leave it to the woman to indicate which she prefers.’

‘A strange course. Perhaps she would have neither one.’

‘The men have not overlooked that sad mischance. But, even in case the woman does not love either of the men, or if she chances to love one more than the other, they would have it known.’

‘Why such haste to have the woman speak?’

‘In fairness to the man who is not chosen.’

She looked appealingly from one to the other of us. Then she smiled the enigmatic smile of a woman who has found man in some folly.

‘Not knowing the woman, nor these men, since you will not name them,’ said she slowly, ‘it appears to me, as judge, that your case as pre-

sented can only be solved on the most general grounds. It strikes me that these poor fellows of whom you speak know little of the ways of women if they expect this paragon to do more than any of her sisters would do in like case.'

'In what way are they expecting too much?'

'Apparently they expect her to give over the universal privilege of keeping men guessing.'

'But she is above such a thing!' burst forth Baptiste. 'She is not a heartless trifler.'

There was a dancing light of mischief in the girl's eyes as she answered:

'How do you know?'

We were silent.

'The credulity of men,' went on the girl, 'apparently is not greater in the desert than in the city. Men everywhere believe that women must be forever making a choice between them. Perhaps this woman of whom you speak has no choice to make. It may be that she esteems — or I may say, loves — these men alike. Perhaps she finds qualities in each that the other lacks. Or she may feel that she is deserving of the love of neither.'

'Impossible! In her, all women are found in one!' exclaimed Baptiste.

'Then it should not be for her to marry any man. Singleness is better for a woman so marvelously gifted.'

'Then it is your belief that this maid loves

both of these men?' I asked. 'Such a thing is incredible.'

'I did not say I believed it, nor is anything incredible where men and women are concerned. It would not be incredible for this woman to love neither of these men. But, if it happens that she loves one, perhaps she has not yet fully awakened to that fact. And if she is under the necessity of having a declaration of her love forced from her, then indeed I am sorry for her. Why do not these men wait until there is a time of calm, when the woman can speak without being swayed by any emotion such as gratitude?'

What the girl said was true enough, and Baptiste and I, with no answer that we could give, fell to stamping out the coals which were all that remained of the fire.

The girl watched us in the starlight, and then laughed.

'What mere boys you men of the prairie are,' she said. Then, as she turned to her teepee, she added: 'Good-night — children!'

And again we heard her laughter, which held the first note of mockery I had ever caught in her voice.

CHAPTER XIX

OUR start along the way to Fort Laramie had been auspicious enough, but it became apparent that our good fortune was not to hold long. The storm-clouds that had been gathering over the mountains convinced me that Nature would soon be making amends for the good-humor she had been showing.

For two days the storm held off, though the curtain over the mountains kept getting a denser gray. Desirous of going as far as we could while our ponies were at full strength, we pushed on rapidly. The haze from the mountains spread over the entire sky, dissolving the sun's rays and intensifying the chill in the air.

In spite of the close guard we kept over our ponies, a wolf managed to hamstring one of the animals, the first night after we had left the Crows. I was compelled to kill the pony and leave the carcass to the pack that hovered in our wake. This necessitated dividing our supplies among the other animals, increasing the size of their burdens. Yet, even with our overloaded horses, we were making good headway. If the snow would only hold off a few days, we might progress beyond the danger-line.

There were no more songs as we rode through

the maze of the prairie's endless undulations. The scouts of the enemy might be met anywhere now. . . . Also Baptiste and I were busy with the countless problems of the trail — the infinitesimal signs among the grasses and the sounds upon the winds which tell a plainsman of the way. Our thoughts became detached — our conversation perfunctory. Occasionally one of us would make a detour, looking for signs of the enemy, but would come back without comment, and the march would be resumed as before. The girl offered no word to break our thoughts, and for hours nothing was heard but the plod-plod of the pony hoofs, the scraping of the travois poles against the ground, and the creak of the leather thongs that bound the heavy packs. Such travel would have been monotony itself had it not been so charged with danger.

The storm broke one noontime, when we were four days from the Indian camp. It started in leisurely enough fashion, with big flakes in advance. Then came a sudden sharpening of the wind and wild flurries of finer snow that blotted out the landscape and made all a void of white. We pitched early camp in a clump of cottonwoods beside a creek. There was dead timber to be had in plenty, and no lack of buffalo-grass for the ponies, which animals were well accustomed to caring for themselves. Our teepees were snug and we had plenty of robes for beds. And it would

have been a poor hunter who could not have brought in plenty of flesh by levying some slight toll on the wild things that came past our camp.

The storm settled into a steady roar and swirl during the night. I could tell by the sag of the teepees that the snow was creeping up their sides, inch by inch. In the morning there was two feet of snow in the level places, and the hollows were filled with enormous drifts. Then the veil was whisked away from the mountains, and the peaks stood forth, clear and cold. Ice fairly flung itself across the surface of the creek, and the cottonwood trees along the stream cracked and snapped in protest as the frost struck to their cores.

We called a council, after the fashion of Indians, around a lodge-fire.

'There is a matter of food to be considered,' I said. 'Our flour is gone. We cannot hope to subsist long on meat alone.'

Baptiste answered with seeming irrelevance.

'Have you counted the creeks from the watershed where we parted with Wolf Bear?' he asked.

'Yes,' I replied. 'This creek is the seventh.'

'We are agreed as to that, and there may be a chance that Baptiste the wastrel can save the day from knowledge gained at the card table.'

The girl and I looked at him in surprise.

'You remember Louis, the trapper at Fort Union, whose toes have all been frozen off, yet

who manages to continue his trapping?' he queried.

'You mean Renaud, who came in with the Hudson's Bay men?'

'Yes. Renaud only a few months ago told me, while we were at the cards, of a *cache* on the seventh creek from this same watershed which was our parting-place with the Crows.'

Baptiste smoked a moment and then continued:

'This *cache* is toward the headwaters of the creek we are on now. It is well into the foothills. Old Louis spoke about it because, among the furs he buried there, he said there was a white fox fur. Also he said, quite incidentally, that there was some flour hidden, with other supplies. I am going to find the *cache* and bring in that flour which old Louis hid for us.'

I knew of the custom of trappers to exchange information as to such locations, as a means of mutual protection. A *cache* was considered inviolate, except in case of dire need. But, in urgent necessity, it might be the means of saving the lives of brother trappers. The minds of the trailmen were marvelously retentive of such things. They could remember the most casual descriptions. I knew that Baptiste, since we had left the watershed, had been checking up on old Louis's information.

But the girl stared at Baptiste, with mingled amazement and alarm in her eyes.

'Do you mean to say that you are going alone into those snowy mountains, with enemies on every hand, merely on the strength of a description that has been given you by some old trapper?' she asked.

Baptiste nodded assent and rose, preparatory to his start.

'But this is impossible!' exclaimed the girl. 'You will meet death, Baptiste. You are not going to permit this, are you, John Crews?'

There was deep agitation in Annabel's voice. Dimly I wondered, as I stared into the fire, if she would have been so alarmed had I been the one to go.

'It is worth trying,' I said. 'Trappers tell of these *caches*, in order that emergencies like this may be met.'

'But suppose it storms again and you lose your way in the snow? Or suppose the wild beasts have opened the *cache*, which they probably have done,' insisted the girl, clinging to Baptiste's arm.

There were tears in her voice and on her cheeks. Baptiste, taking her by the wrists, gently loosened her clasp. She sank to the buffalo robes which we had piled for her beside the fire. Her face was buried in her arms, and she sobbed convulsively.

I followed Baptiste outside.

'Now will you believe that she loves you?' I asked.

'Many a woman has wept harder over the departure of a brother,' smiled my comrade. 'Tell her good-bye for me.'

Then we went together and caught the horse he was to ride, and saddled it and tied some frozen meat at his cantle as an emergency ration, and he rode off. . . .

I did not stir far from camp during the five days that elapsed before Baptiste's return. Most of the time I spent keeping a sharp lookout for foes. The girl kept to her teepee, and I saw to it that she had cottonwood in plenty for her lodge-fire. No more snow fell, but there was one vast, billowing white sea to the very tops of the mountains.

When Baptiste came back he was on foot and exhausted. But he was carrying a sack of flour on his back. He had found the *cache*, just as old Louis had described it. The bears had tried to break into it, but the Hudson's Bay man had been too clever in constructing it. The supplies were just as the old trapper had left them. Only there was no ammunition.

'If the old man had only hidden a dozen round of powder and lead we might call him brother for life,' said Baptiste. 'But it is too much to expect everything.'

On his return to the camp, Baptiste had met with a misadventure which was a blow to all of us. His horse had fallen into a snow-filled gulch and

had broken one of its legs. Baptiste drove an arrow into the poor beast's heart and then hoisted the precious flour to his shoulders and staggered through the snow, reaching camp only after the most terrific physical exertion.

It was time, for the monotony of our diet was beginning to tell upon the girl, and she was eating little. She spoke often of her own failure and the failure of those about her to appreciate the privilege afforded by civilization, when there was opportunity to secure the best and most varied foods, even to rare fruits, both in and out of season.

'Often have I refused to touch dainties, merely owing to some whim of appetite,' she said, 'never thinking that I might see the time when the slightest change of fare would be welcome.'

Such talk wrought me to desperation, yet there was nothing I could do, for the ground was frozen too hard to admit of digging the roots from which the Indian women were wont to make a palatable substitute for flour. But with Baptiste's coming with the flour, our table began to look up, and the girl ate with some zest, which pleased us mightily. She insisted on cooking, and we humored her. The days would have been too monotonous without something of the sort to occupy her attention. Not that she would have let the silences break down her courage. Since the night she had heard us talking of our love for

her, something of new lightness, almost of forced gayety, had come into her speech. She hummed light songs under her breath, and occasionally she would call Baptiste or me, and would sing the words to us, in a low voice, for silence must now be the rule of our camp. Usually they were songs of school-days, which she had learned in Virginia. Sometimes they were from operas, and were in foreign tongues. The French I could understand, but the Italian she had to translate for me, though Baptiste could comprehend most of them.

Then she would summon us to hear this or that story of school-days. We knew all the girls with whom her lot was cast — Blanche, Marie, Elise, Marguerite, and a certain Louise, who, according to Annabel, was the wisest, the merriest, and the prettiest girl in all the light-hearted company.

‘Ah, but you must see Louise!’ she would say when we complimented her upon her beauty. And if we praised something she had cooked at our camp-fire, she would respond: ‘But Louise could have done better. You should taste her salads.’

It was Louise this and Louise that, until finally I had a strong mental picture of the girl, and so did Baptiste, though both of us were more than half-inclined to believe that Annabel was joking and that no such person as her school-girl companion existed. But when taxed with this, Anna-

bel would protest vehemently enough that Louise was real and that our lives would not be complete until we had looked upon her and had seen what real beauty was like.

In this way, with talk and banter growing out of small things, we spent twenty days at the creek-side, with the weather holding a tight grip on us and the snows too deep for progress. To be sure, we were getting along well enough, with plenty of game all about us for the killing. Baptiste and I kept our bows twanging, and Annabel became expert enough so that one day she brought down a rabbit — something for which she was immediately sorry and would shoot no more except at an inanimate mark.

During all these days and nights, in spite of the apparent unconcern with which we faced the girl, Baptiste and I were deeply troubled lest some foe should stumble on our retreat. We were in a country that was ranged freely by Sioux and Cheyennes, both of whom were at outs with the Crows and none too friendly toward the whites. At odd hours of the night I rose from my buffalo robes and, seizing the great bow of Strikes the Lance, crept out and circled the camp to make sure that all was well. Baptiste shared these night watches with me, and in the daytime we were both looking constantly for the flutter of an eagle feather that might betray an enemy.

It was for Baptiste to make the discovery

which we both dreaded. He had slipped out alone into a moonlit midnight to see if all was well with our horses. He saw the figure of an Indian, busy with the bars of the rude corral which we had built to keep the wolves away. Keeping within the shadow of the corral, Baptiste sprang upon the Indian. A tight clutch on the interloper's throat prevented any outcry, and a quick knife-thrust made the silence permanent. Then, turning the body over in the reddening snow, Baptiste saw that it was a Cheyenne he had killed.

Baptiste came to rouse me, but I met him before he had gone many paces from the corral, as his long absence had told me that something unusual was afoot. The body of the Cheyenne lay where it had fallen, and the knife in the outstretched hand told that Baptiste had struck none too soon. He was a fine figure of a warrior, with his robe fallen away from him and his great coppery body outlined against the glistening snow. The fact that Baptiste's victim was a Cheyenne and not a Sioux at once disturbed and reassured me. It disturbed me because it indicated that this was an unusual winter of warfare among the Indians. As a general thing tribes that were not friendly were willing to confine their war activities to pleasant weather. The different nations went into their winter camps and the warriors were at ease until spring had cleared the snowdrifts from the warpath. The

fact that war parties were abroad at this season indicated unusual restlessness of spirit.

If it had been a Sioux that Baptiste had killed, we should have looked for a general attack without delay, for we should have known that Le Crochet had found us out. But this Cheyenne evidently was a scout who had seen an opportunity to do some horse-stealing before returning to his command, which undoubtedly was not far away.

In the anxiously awaited dawn we searched the plain for indications of other Indians. The Cheyenne's pony we found in a draw close to our camp. We knew it would not be long before the remainder of the party of Cheyennes would be searching for their missing companion. It was imperative for us to move quickly.

Under the circumstances, I felt that it would be folly to use the travois, which was clumsy and difficult to drag through the deep snow. We must cut our equipment to the last pound and leave as slight a trail as possible. A sharp wind was blowing, and, from the way in which the loose snow was being whipped from the ridges, I knew it would not be long until our trail would be covered. Also, unless the Cheyennes were quick to find the trail of their missing brother, their chance of discovering him at all would be materially lessened. Given a few hours' start from camp, it would be impossible for any foe to trail us.

Our belongings were hastily flung together. We used the Cheyenne's pony as an extra pack-animal. Our teepees were small, and one of them could be packed on a horse. We left the poles behind, trusting our good fortune for timber at each night's camping-place.

Annabel was not concerned over the things that might confront us owing to our hurried dash into the snowy plain. Her only anxiety was over Baptiste when she heard of his encounter with the Cheyenne.

'What ways of danger have I not led you into!' she exclaimed, her eyes filling with tears.

'*Mon Dieu*, little sister,' said Baptiste, patting her shoulder, 'it is we who should weep because of the trails of bloodshed you must follow.'

'It would have been better had you let me give myself up as your ransom,' insisted the girl. 'I am sure that, if I had given my word to marry him and to make no further attempt to escape, Abner would have taken me to my uncle.'

'Le Crochet would have had something to say,' I broke in. 'You know little of The Hook if you think he would have given you up to Abner. Probably he would have carried you to the Sioux camp as his chattel, after he had slit the throats of Abner and his men.'

'I think,' said Baptiste, 'M'sieu Le Crochet has been miscast in the theater of life. He should have been a feudal baron, and then he could have

carried off what he pleased, with none to call him to account.'

'He is so great a villain,' I replied, addressing the girl, 'that I want you to promise not to fall alive into his hands. We have but one rifle in the camp and that has but a single load. It will always be left in the camp, within your grasp. If Baptiste and I are killed, and by some evil chance we have not managed to take The Hook with us, you are to turn that weapon on yourself.'

'I understand, and I promise,' said the girl.

No better time could have arisen for my speaking these words which had long been in my mind. Heretofore we had tried to shelter the girl, not only from actual danger, but from her own fears. Wherever possible we had sought to keep her from a full realization of the dangers that threatened. But now we were at the last stages of a venture that was born of desperation. Any hour, or any minute, might see Baptiste or myself, or both of us, struck down. Every day's journey toward our goal could only increase the danger. It was best that she should know the penalty of the game as well as its rewards.

As the girl gave her promise to kill herself rather than fall into Le Crochet's hands, our horses toiled up the last of the slope leading to the creek-bed. The site of our abandoned camp was behind us, with the body of the Cheyenne rapidly resolving itself into a mere mound of

snow. The prairie lay before us, vast, and frozen to a leprous whiteness. Somewhere in this mysterious expanse ahead of us was Fort Laramie, and somewhere our enemies lurked — chief among them Le Crochet, the two lusts that burned the strongest in his veins being his greed for gold and his desire to slay me.

I felt my pony quiver in the sharp wind that leaped at us like a wild animal as we reached the top of the slope. A chill struck through the thick buffalo robe in which I was wrapped. But, with what semblance of cheer I could call to my aid, I turned to the girl, whose pony was plodding in the tracks made by my own reluctant horse.

‘Fort Laramie!’ I called, though the wind almost thrust the words back in my throat.

The girl, wrapped even more warmly than Baptiste and myself, repeated the cry cheerily enough. Baptiste, bringing up the rear, where he could speed the lagging pack-animals, echoed the girl’s call:

‘Fort Laramie!’

From a near-by knoll a prairie wolf watched us and then slunk warily into a hollow. Dry snow, caught up by the wind as if by a child at rough play, cut our faces and hissed over the crust of the older snowfall. Soon the trail that connected us with the sheltered and friendly creek-bottom was wiped out. We were traveling out of a void into a void — a restless, living whiteness that

wearied our sight and stung us with countless lashes.

Grimly and silently we bent to the trail task, our hearts echoing to the cry that had become a prayer:

‘Fort Laramie!’

CHAPTER XX

THE prairie, like the fondest of parents, is sometimes unsparing in the punishment of its own children. Seldom have I known the plains to take on a more sinister aspect of inhospitality than during the days that followed our dash from camp to escape discovery by the companions of the slain Cheyenne.

At times I thought that perhaps it would have been better if we had remained in camp and run the risk of capture by the Cheyennes, rather than face almost certain death from exposure to the elements.

We kept as low amid the swales as possible, to minimize the chances of discovery by Indian scouts. This not only made our course winding and caused a great loss of time, but largely increased the risk of travel, not only to ourselves, but to our horses. Often the draws were filled with snow to a considerable height and this made it necessary to skirt the side hills. Frequently a horse's legs would go from under the animal, and he would roll down the hill, pack and all. If one of the saddle animals fell, it required no little skill to free one's self before becoming entangled in the stirrups and rolling down the hill with the struggling animal.

Annabel was riding the most sure-footed horse, but more than once the animal slipped, as the others were frequently doing. The girl was always on the alert, and in some miraculous fashion managed to stand free from the horse before Baptiste or I could reach her side.

'*Mon Dieu!*' exclaimed Baptiste, when both of us had hastened to her aid and had found her standing unhurt in the trail after her horse had taken one of these dangerous falls, 'there is something more than mere riding skill in this. The girl is under divine protection.'

And, indeed, as I looked back upon her in the trail, her face occasionally uplifted in serenity toward the frowning skies that seemed to crowd more threateningly upon us each day, I could only share my comrade's thought.

Yet we found the girl most human and companionable, with those traits more pronounced as our difficulties increased. The shock of a sudden and unexpected experience never left her shaken and unnerved. When a horse fell, she was quick to assist in getting the animal to its feet, and to lash the pack anew. Also hers was the first voice to urge us onward.

She protested against our efforts to provide her with more of the creature comforts than Baptiste and I enjoyed. If she had a double supply of robes for her teepee, we must explain it by saying that it was necessary for one of us to stand guard.

Giving her more than her share of the food was not so easy, yet we managed it occasionally, and it became a game with us, this depriving ourselves that she might benefit. It was a game which she managed to play very cleverly in her own behalf, and we found more than once that she had outwitted us and that she was the one who was self-robbed.

For five days we struggled against the cold and snow and other handicaps that Nature imposed upon us. Our progress, even at the best, was slow. We were compelled to make camp early in the afternoon, in order that we might provide ourselves with sufficient wood for the night. The cold weather brought out the greatest horde of wolves that I had ever seen. It seemed as if every den in the plateau had spewed forth an enemy to harass us. While we had no fear of being attacked by the wolves, we were uneasy on account of our horses. This uneasiness proved justified, for one night, in spite of our fighting the wolves back with firebrands, two of our horses were stampeded with terror and ran blindly away, only to be brought to the ground dead before they had gone more than a stone's throw from us.

This necessitated lightening our packs once more. One of our teepees was left behind. I was alarmed at the bulk of the supplies we were forced to leave, yet there was nothing to do but to reduce our burden in accordance with our

steadily dwindling carrying capacity. We had lost many hours because we were forced to let our horses graze in daytime. At night we kept them picketed and closely guarded on account of the wild animals. Fortunately the snow was not crusted and they picked up enough grazing to keep them from actual starvation, but they were losing flesh and strength. Under such circumstances, with their packs increasing in size and weight, it was not strange that the poor animals totaled less and less in mileage for us each day.

Thus we went on, winding in and out among the hills, and fairly tumbling down the steep slopes of arroyos and struggling painfully out of them once more — and always pressing on in the general direction of Fort Laramie.

To the girl this grim march must have become a sort of phantasm — a parade of ghosts across a dead plain. Yet no word of protest came from her. Once I remember turning back to rub her cheeks with snow, to counteract the effects of frostbite. To my surprise, I found tears frozen there, but there were no tears in her voice as she laughed up into my face.

'*Allons!*' she called back to Baptiste. 'March on, *mon enfant!* If our bodily strength is not equal to our Captain's, at least we can show him that we have strength of spirit.'

While no reproach had been intended, I felt ashamed at her words, for I was always forgetting

that physical hardships did not rest as lightly upon others as upon my huge frame. Thereafter I slackened our pace even more. It seemed as though the trail grudged us every mile it gave. . . . Sometimes, as I rode ahead, I felt that the sight of an enemy in that white and endless expanse would be welcome.

At last one of the pack-horses lay helpless after a fall of a few yards down a hillside. I saw that the animal was dying, so an arrow was driven into his heart to prevent suffering, and I proceeded to the business of redistributing the packs.

Baptiste helped me adjust them, while the girl looked wearily on. While he was endeavoring to loop the end of a rope which I had thrown to him across the top of a pack, Baptiste staggered and fell in the snow, almost under the horse's hoofs.

In an instant the girl was out of her saddle and at his side.

'He has been sick for days,' she cried, 'and has said no word of complaint. Often I have noticed that he could hardly sit in the saddle.'

Under her ministrations, Baptiste opened his eyes, but I saw that he was in no condition to go on.

Even as I looked into his face, Baptiste's cheeks took on an unnatural flush which even the frost could not pale, and his sunken eyes burned feverishly. He tried feebly to get up, but sank back with his head against the girl's knee.

Despairingly I looked around, for it seemed now that we were reduced to the last extremity. Just below the side hill on which we stood was a prairie watercourse, lined with bushes and a few straggling trees. Picking out the best spot for a camping-place, I made my way to it, bearing the form of Baptiste, the girl following with the horses.

I put up the one small teepee that was left to us and made the best sort of camp that was possible under such conditions. Then, with a sick man on our hands, and with our supplies desperately low, we counted the slow merging of the days until two dragging weeks had passed.

I have no doubt that, had it not been for the devoted care given him by the girl, the first week in our improvised camp would have been Baptiste's last on earth. Such rude remedies as I had picked up at army posts and from my trapping brethren seemed hopelessly crude and inefficient beside her skillful ministrations. For several nights she had no sleep, but sat at Baptiste's side in the little teepee, catching his faintest whisper and noting the slightest changes in the course of his fever.

As for Baptiste, his tongue was loosened by his illness, and he talked wildly and incoherently of his love for the girl. He would start up in his bed of buffalo robes, calling her name, and would lie down only when her cooling palm had been laid

on his brow. Then he would stretch out his fevered hand and crush hers in its grasp.

Looking in at the flap of the tent, I would see them thus, as they had been for hours, Baptiste quiet enough until her hand was loosed from his, when he would again call upon her wildly, in mingled French and English.

At such times the girl would smile upon me, but in her unfathomable eyes I could not read what I sought to learn — whether the love which Baptiste was declaring had struck a responsive chord in her heart, or whether she was humoring him as any good nurse will humor a patient given to the hallucinations of fever.

Nor by the slightest look or word would I have sought to force that secret from her. I knew that Baptiste's love for her was all that bore him through his illness. He lived because of the sound of her voice and the touch of her hand. With those gone, he would have slipped away into a land more white and mysterious than that which now dwarfed us. This slip of a girl, who only a short time ago was unknown to us, was now all that stood between death and my trail brother, who had faced all the dangers of the wilderness with me. Had we been alone, Baptiste and I, when this fever had come upon him, it would have been my melancholy lot to gather a cairn of stones and thereby protect his body from the wolves until such time as I could return, in less

harsh months, to sink one more grave and set up one more lonely headstone in this vast country.

When at last the fever turned, it came at an hour when I had well-nigh given up all hope. It was one of the coldest days that had assailed us since we left the camp of the Crows — not the heavy, penetrating cold I have known in the less rarefied atmosphere closer to the sea, but the sharp, crisp cold of the upper plateau region. Frost sparkled in the air like diamond dust. In such a peculiar condition was the atmosphere that five suns seemed to be in the sky at one time — a phenomenon which, had we been in an Indian camp, would have been hailed by the medicine men as portentous.

I had managed to keep a small fire going in the little teepee during Baptiste's illness. At one side of the tent lay the sick man, and on the other side were the robes where the girl lay, fully dressed, and snatched sufficient sleep to sustain her, though when she did so was a mystery to me. It seemed that she was always up and attending to Baptiste's wants — heating him some nourishing gruel, which she managed to concoct from the slender stores that still remained to us, or seeing that in his feverish tossings he did not uncover himself to the sharp air.

It seemed to me that Baptiste had reached the point where human endurance could stand the strain no more. At first, when the illness came

upon him, I feared that he had fallen victim to the disease which had raged in the Indian camp. But no sign of smallpox appeared, and it was evident that he was suffering from the fever which I had seen bring many a trapper low after undue exposure to the elements.

Heavy-hearted, I kept myself busy about the camp. I heard the girl call, and sought the tent unwillingly enough, fearful of the news that I was to hear. But I knew by Annabel's smile as I entered the teepee that my forebodings were groundless.

'Feel his brow,' she said. 'It is moist with sweat, and he is sleeping quietly for the first time since the fever gripped him.'

It was as she had said. Baptiste's breathing was even. He no longer stirred in his sleep, calling upon the girl. In thankfulness I gazed at my beloved friend, whose clear-cut features were outlined with cameo-like distinctness against the dark background of the buffalo robe on which he slept.

'Now what good news have you in return for what I have given you?' said the girl, as I clasped her hands in silent gratitude.

At this I could say nothing. I had hesitated to tell her that, in spite of all my efforts at protection, the wolves had managed to run off and kill another of our horses. This had happened several nights before the favorable turn to Baptiste's illness. Most of the days in the interim I had

spent building a sled. I had fashioned some rude runners from the toughest of the wood available and between these had stretched a body of buffalo hide, that all-purpose material without which the Indians would have been helpless.

I had often seen such sleds constructed and it was a matter of no great difficulty to make one capable of transporting Baptiste.

When I showed Annabel what I had fashioned, she said:

‘This sledge, then, means that we must go before Baptiste is able to sit in the saddle?’

I nodded.

‘Our supplies are practically exhausted,’ I replied. ‘To stay here longer means certain death. We must go on. It is our only hope.’

Yielding to the situation’s necessities as uncomplainingly as she had always done heretofore, the girl made preparations for our leaving. Fortunately, the weather had lessened in its severity. The next morning after the favorable change in Baptiste’s condition we broke camp. The sick man was weak, but of good cheer. His voice had the natural ring, and I knew that his iron constitution would now assert itself and that his improvement would be rapid. I knew so well of marvelous recoveries by other hardy plainsmen that I did not hesitate to start under conditions which I had no doubt were a shock to Baptiste’s nurse, but which were unavoidable.

Baptiste, wrapped in buffalo robes, rode in the sled, which was also packed with supplies. Annabel rode the horse which pulled the sled, and I walked ahead, breaking the trail. Occasionally, when rough places were unavoidable, I would have to go back, and, by holding the sled, prevent Baptiste from being thrown into the snow. When I did so, he would smile at me, with the old dauntless spirit in the depths of his eyes, and would say:

'Allons, mes enfants! Fort Laramie will yet be ours.'

Such travel was slow to the point of exasperation. We became mere automatons, wandering, apparently to no purpose, in this maze of hills. Occasionally I went on far ahead and brought down such game as we needed. I built fires sparingly at night and not at all in the daytime. When I had brought in a fresh kill, we cooked meat enough to last us several days.

Baptiste was improving rapidly, but the regimen was too severe for the girl. She ate little, and I knew she must soon begin to droop. The weather had moderated, though not sufficiently to melt the snow, which was fortunate, for in heavy going all progress would have been impossible. Sharp winds no longer whipped us, but in one way this was not to our advantage, for our broad trail was left uncovered. Any party of Indians crossing our sledge tracks would soon have run us down.

I gave up all efforts at concealment now, as I could see that it had become a mere test of the girl's endurance. If she broke down, we were hopelessly lost in the vast desert of snow. I figured that we were getting near enough to the post to have some hope. We had crossed two good-sized streams on the ice, and the next watershed would slope toward the fort. If we could not reach the post itself, at least we might fall in with some scouts.

Then the wolves killed our remaining horse. They set upon the animal one night almost within the glow of the fire, so bold had they become. Every wolf I brought down with an arrow was pounced upon and torn to bits by the ravenous pack. Even when firebrands were thrown among them, the animals gave back but little. Their glowing eyes circled our camp unceasingly from nightfall to dawn.

I had taken more horses than would have sufficed ordinarily for so small a company of travelers, knowing that some were certain to fall victim to wolves or to accidents on the trail. But my precautions had not been sufficient, and we were left in the predicament which every plainsman dreaded — afoot on the prairie in winter.

Now, indeed, had I cause to give thanks for the physical strength that had been vouchsafed me. Bending against a strap of buffalo-hide, I dragged the sled through the snow, breaking trail

as I went. The girl plodded on behind. We were compelled to leave all shelter in the camp with the dead horse. Two extra robes were carried on the sled, for the girl and myself. At night the girl rolled herself in one of the robes and went to sleep, too exhausted to eat. Sheltering myself as best I could with the other robe, I snatched a little sleep at the fireside. Baptiste gained steadily and rapidly. He even managed to walk an hour or so each day, thus lightening my burden.

Thus we fought on, every step being yielded to us grudgingly. We seldom spoke now. I bent to the breast-strap until I perspired as if in midsummer. Then, when I stopped, my clothes were quickly frozen on me. But I exulted in each day's labor, and found a savage pleasure in counting the miles, through the few hours of sunshine, until it was time for us to camp again. I vowed that the wilderness should not break me. When exhaustion turned my limbs leaden, I flung off my outer clothes and toiled more desperately. My moccasins were torn to ribbons. I patched them with pieces of buffalo-hide. My feet bled, and had an enemy come across our trail, I could have been tracked like a wounded animal.

The chief thought that drummed through my brain was that the man behind me must be saved for the girl, and the girl must be saved for the man. How Annabel kept up, I could not imagine. Nor did I try to figure it out. I merely knew that

when I looked around she was there behind the sled, sometimes pushing against it with her feeble strength.

Baptiste pleaded with me to put the girl in his place and go on without him. He even threw himself from the sled, and lay face down in the snow, vowing that I should carry him no farther.

I picked him up and threw him back among the robes, and none too gently.

'If I am to be best man at your wedding,' I said, 'how do you expect it to be brought about if you are to stay here as prey for the wolves?'

Thoughts of days in old St. Louis flashed through my brain as I heard the monotonous breaking of snow crust under my feet. I timed my steps to old melodies that I had not thought of for years — songs my mother used to sing when we were voyaging down the long rivers of the Middle West. . . . One night I could stay awake no longer. I roused myself after several hours of void, thinking that the fire must of necessity be out and wondering why the wolves were not tearing at all our throats. But I saw the girl sitting at the fireside, replenishing it as she had done faithfully through the night. I cursed myself, but alarm rather than bitterness took possession of me, for I realized that my strength must be slipping from me.

The next morning the girl could not respond to my call. She stirred feebly in her buffalo robe, but could not rise.

'I cannot go on, John Crews,' she said. 'Take Baptiste and push ahead and leave me here to die. Death will come quickly and will not be hard.'

I made our final camp, and cut wood enough to last two or three days. There was dried meat in plenty, but naught else to eat. The gun, containing the single load that represented our total stock of ammunition, I left with Baptiste, who was now able to totter about the camp, though as weakly as a newly born buffalo calf.

Then I started forth alone, with the bow of Strikes the Lance on my back, my objective being a certain ridge, several miles ahead of us, from which I figured that I might sight friend or foe somewhere along the last long slope that led to Fort Laramie.

CHAPTER XXI

THE divide which was my objective was perhaps ten miles from our camp. It was thrust far out from the mountains — a long, barren ridge, at no place steep. In fact, it was merely a triangular uprising of the plain, the top being comparatively easy of approach, or at least appearing so from distant observation.

But before one could reach the crest of the divide, it was necessary to cross many draws and arroyos formed by the quick rush of storm waters. I was a good half-day in reaching the crown of the ridge. I traveled cautiously, for now I felt that I was, indeed, in the country of the enemy. This barren ridge had long been recognized as separating the hunting ground of the Crows from the country of the Cheyennes and Sioux. I was confident that somewhere along this divide were enemy patrols. If we could once get past them, it would be best to abandon all attempt at hiding and make a bold and open dash for the post. But I felt that at this particular stage of our journey every rock and tree might shelter foes.

My first glimpse down the other side of the divide, when finally I had reached the summit, showed me no sign of life. It was a country much the same as that through which we had just

passed, billowy with hills, seamed with arroyos, and interspersed with clumps of trees, the general line of which indicated watercourses leading to the Platte.

Finally, as I searched out the details of the landscape bit by bit, I saw a thin column of smoke in a clump of trees which I judged to be not more than two miles distant. I was certain it could not be made by Indians, as war-parties would not have been building fires. My heart beat high with hope, for I felt that only white men could have made the smoke which I had observed.

Keeping close to such shelter as the upper slope of the ridge afforded, I picked my way down the side. Not more than a hundred yards from the top of the ridge I came upon pony tracks in great numbers. I estimated that they had been made not more than twenty-four hours previously. Plainly enough, a large body of Indians had ridden along the upper reaches of the watershed, with the top of the ridge between them and our camp. My first question was whether they rode thus by accident or design. Were they unaware that we were on the other side of the ridge, or did they know of our presence and were they keeping in hiding in order that they might come upon us from some more favorable point of attack?

It was my belief that the Indians knew of our presence beyond the sheltering ridge, but it would

be of no avail for me to go back to camp now. The column of smoke ahead of me seemed to be the last chance in our long struggle against odds. Accordingly I pressed toward it, not attempting further concealment, but running as an athlete to a final goal.

The smoke had disappeared. Evidently those in the clump of trees from which it had come had extinguished their fire. But I had marked the spot where the smoke had arisen — the bottom of a wide wash, in the bowl of which were clustered cottonwoods.

I fell several times, but rushed on, unmindful of hurts. My hands were bleeding, and my improvised moccasins of buffalo-hide were flapping in tatters.

As I came out upon the edge of the depression in which was the clump of cottonwoods, I shouted for joy, for just beyond the border of the trees was a group of horses, in charge of two herdsmen. I caught the gleam of blue against the darker background of the cottonwoods. The men were soldiers, and the horses were cavalry mounts.

My shout aroused the horse guards, and, as they saw me racing toward them, both fired their pistols as a signal. Men swarmed out of the cottonwoods almost on the instant, and dashed for their horses. The herders did not wait for the others, but set spur and galloped toward me.

Amazement was written on their faces as they

came close and saw a giant, with unkempt locks, and with a huge bow and quiver of arrows at his back, racing down the slope at top speed.

The first soldier to reach me was a burly private — one of those detailed to herd duty — and he rode a beautiful, fleet horse that spurned the earth in long leaps. His first supposition, so he told me afterward, was that I was closely pursued by Indians. So, wheeling his horse beside me, he motioned me to swing up behind him, which I did, and we galloped back toward the other soldiers, who had gained their mounts and were riding to meet us.

In a few moments I was surrounded by questioning men in the friendly army blue. To my joy I found the detachment in charge of the young lieutenant who had ridden out with us from Fort Laramie when Abner had reported an attack on the emigrant wagon-train.

‘John Crews!’ he exclaimed, as he wrung my hand. ‘You and that young poet-partner of yours have been given up for dead.’

Then he told me, briefly, that he had been sent out to punish such marauding bands of Indians as he could find and particularly the Sioux that were harboring Le Crochet and Abner and their renegade white followers.

‘Give me a gun and ammunition, and let me ride this horse alone,’ said I, ‘and I’ll lead you to the game you’re seeking.’

The soldier in front of me slipped out of his saddle, at a word from the lieutenant, and handed me his rifle and cartridge-belt.

‘There’s no better horse at the post than the one you’re on, Crews,’ said the lieutenant. ‘Lead on, and we’ll not be far behind.’

But the clatter of hoofs behind me soon ceased, after I had wheeled my horse and dashed for the top of the ridge. There were daring riders among those soldiers, but none could keep me in sight over that rough and snowy ground. The horse I bestrode was truly a noble animal, and gave me every ounce of his strength, as I leaped him across arroyos at which mounts of less stamina and courage would have balked.

I had gained the top of the ridge, before the others had more than halfway made the ascent by the less dangerous routes they had been compelled to choose for caution’s sake. I caught a glimpse of the lieutenant, far in the lead. With a wave of encouragement to him, I plunged down the other side of the ridge toward our little camp.

I had no more than crossed the divide before I saw pony tracks — fresh ones this time. The tracks had not been there when I had picked my way to the top of the ridge on foot. Evidently, by the kindly interposition of Providence, I had just missed discovery on crossing the ridge toward the soldiers’ camp. And the Indians could not have been aware of the presence of the soldiers in

the cottonwoods, or they would not have tarried in the neighborhood. No doubt they were so intent on surrounding our camp and capturing us that they had neglected to keep watch on the opposite side of the ridge. And it was plain that I had gone through without discovery, and that the Indians imagined I was still with Baptiste and the girl in our camp.

A glance in passing the pony tracks told me that there were forty or fifty Indians in the party. With forebodings crowding upon me, I urged the horse toward our camp. This side of the ridge I found to be less barren than the other. With some difficulty my horse forced his way through a heavy growth of brush on a wide piece of benchland. At the edge of this bench was a sharp declivity of earth, where some great glacier had cut its way in ages past. The moraine, at the foot of the declivity, was free from any growth larger than sagebrush. In the center of this moraine our camp was made.

The brush on the benchland was excellent for purpose of concealment. As I came to the edge of the declivity I got a clear view of all below me, and was certain that my approach had not been observed.

To the left of our camp, in a solid group, were the Indians on their restive horses. I could see, by the hoof-marks in the moraine, that the savages had swept toward our camp in a solid body,

evidently intending to capture it in a single rush. Then, when only a short distance from the camp, they had veered away. Now they stood in an undecided group, pennons and *coup* sticks and war-bonnets fluttering in the wind, but no one making a hostile move.

I could not understand the reason for this inaction on the part of the Indians. Then, as I looked toward the camp, my heart was almost stilled. I could see the forms of Baptiste and Annabel, swathed in buffalo robes, on either side of the charred remains of our fire.

At first I thought they were dead, but second thought convinced me that such could not be the case, for Le Crochet would have given strict orders to capture all in the camp alive.

I did not know that Annabel, after Baptiste had sighted the Indians, had suggested that they paint their faces with the juices of some dried berries and make it appear as if they were the victims of smallpox.

This had been done, and they had stretched out on the ground, the face of each a ghastly sight.

The first warrior to gallop to the edge of the camp had uttered a shrill cry of alarm — the Sioux word meaning smallpox.

Instantly the Indians had turned aside, more quickly than if they had been suddenly faced with a score of riflemen. Le Crochet and Abner, who

were riding with them, were carried along with the rush. The white men were furious at this cowardliness of the Indians because of smallpox. But no argument could induce the Indians to approach the camp.

Finally it was agreed that Le Crochet and Abner must attend to wresting the secret of the gold from those who were in the camp. These villains had no idea that a trick was being played upon them. It was natural enough that we should have fallen victim to the disease which had been ravaging the Crow Nation.

Le Crochet had the caution of most trappers. My apparent absence from the camp rather disconcerted him. Perhaps I had been the first to be stricken, and had been left, a prey of the wolves, farther back on the trail. If any spark of life still remained in the girl or Baptiste, the secret of the gold should be forced from one or both before death came. But meantime it was just as well to proceed cautiously.

Le Crochet and Abner consulted a moment as they left the Indians and approached the camp. Acting on Le Crochet's orders, Abner rode in a half-circle, to the opposite side of the camp. Thus he was the closer to me, when I pushed my way out of the brush and came in sight of the drama in the moraine.

I could hear no sound of the cavalrymen behind me, but this was no time for waiting. I

urged my horse over the edge of the declivity, and the courageous animal half-slid, half-jumped down the curving descent.

The noise caused Abner to look around. I saw the same look of fear in the man's face that I had seen at Fort Laramie. Yet, weak as Abner evidently had become at the paralyzing touch of his own cowardice, he instinctively drew his rifle to his shoulder.

I gave no thought to the gun in the cavalryman's scabbard at my horse's side. Abner's bullet whistled far over my head, just as my mount caught his feet under him on the level footing at the base of the declivity.

As I galloped toward Abner, I dropped the reins to my saddle pommel and fitted an arrow to the bow of Strikes the Lance.

Again Abner fired and missed, the twang of the bowstring being lost in the noise of the rifle. The arrow which I had drawn to its head went straight to its mark. As my horse swept past Abner, I caught a glimpse of the man's rolling eyes, his distorted face, and the convulsive working of lips which sought to curse me, but which could make no sound, owing to the blood that gushed and bubbled between them. And I could see his long hands, clawing desperately at the arrow feathers which stood forth, just above his heart.

Le Crochet, from his position on the opposite side of the camp, could not see all that went on.

His best chance to shoot me was lost when I slid down the declivity. But, being caught by surprise, he had stood gazing momentarily. Then he had rushed toward his horse, which stood only a few steps away.

Once in the saddle, Le Crochet turned, just as Abner fell. If he had any thought of coming to meet me, he gave it over, and, wheeling his horse, he galloped the animal toward the Sioux. But I had no intention of letting my enemy go unscathed. He was more than a bow-shot from me, so I flung aside the weapon of Strikes the Lance, and drew the cavalryman's rifle.

Le Crochet, looking over his shoulder and seeing me about to fire, flung himself under the neck of his horse, Indian fashion. But I was not bent on shooting him. For the first time in my life, I fired at a horse. Le Crochet's mount leaped high in the air and then fell dead, with his rider pinned to the ground underneath.

The Sioux, who had been waiting for their white leader, gave a shout as Le Crochet fell. None offered to ride to his assistance, however, as the Sioux were afraid that I had help close at hand. Yet they were unwilling to ride away, and stood looking as I galloped up to Le Crochet, who was vainly trying to free himself from the weight of the horse's body.

Le Crochet's rifle had been flung twenty feet or more from where the trapper had fallen.

Realizing the hopelessness of his struggle, he lay quiet as I rode up and dismounted beside him.

As I stooped over him, I have no doubt that he thought he was to get the death-blow which he would have given to me in like circumstances. He said no word, but the hatred that blazed in his eyes was so intense that I was overjoyed, for it would have been disappointing to me had my enemy proved a weakling in our final hour of reckoning.

Seizing Le Crochet's hunting-knife, I flung it after his rifle. Then I rolled the dead horse from the leg of the prostrate trapper, and Le Crochet sat up and rubbed his ankle, looking at me narrowly as he did so.

'Can you stand, M'sieu Le Crochet?' I said. 'If so, waste no time about it.'

'I'm an unarmed man, Crews,' he snarled, still sitting and rubbing his ankle. 'Give me some sort of a weapon and I'll fight it out with you.'

'It's better done without weapons,' I said, throwing aside the cavalryman's rifle and tossing my hunting-knife after it. 'You have said something about getting your talons in my gullet, Le Crochet. If you can make good your boast, your way to freedom is open.'

He rose slowly, and tried his ankle as if uncertain of its strength. Then, from a stooping posture, he flung himself upon me.

We came together breast to breast and foot to

foot. Never have I felt a man more mightily muscled. If I had not been prepared for him, he must have borne me over, but as it was I met him fairly, and a great joy surged over me as I felt his huge frame quiver beneath the unexpected shock.

His misshapen hand sought my throat, but I caught his wrist in my left hand and twisted it until the bones cracked and I knew the talon was helpless. Le Crochet's blasphemy that he heaped upon me changed to a madman's shriek of rage and pain. His other hand sought my eyes, to blind me, but I avoided the clutching fingers, and, with my breast still against his and my right arm encircling, I bent him backwards until his spine parted and the last of his French and English curses changed to a prayer for mercy.

Then I lifted the thing that had been Le Crochet, and held it high above my head, that the Sioux might see, and sent it crashing to the earth.

As I did so, a bugle sounded from the edge of the moraine. The Sioux turned and fled in disorder, and I heard the pounding of hoofs and the firing of shots, as the cavalrymen, streaming into the moraine, followed in pursuit.

But I turned toward the little camp, and a shout of joy burst from my throat as Baptiste and Annabel came to meet me.

CHAPTER XXII

WHEN we arrived at Fort Laramie, three days later, the plains were cowering under skies so dark that the fallen snow was robbed of all its brightness. Under the heavy clouds that sent their tendrils into the hollows, and blotted out the hills in leaden pigments, the winds ceased functioning as if finding it impossible to force a way through such dense atmosphere. The noises of the prairie — the barking of the marmots, the howl of the wolf, and the staccato mouthings of the coyote — were not to be heard. All Nature seemed to be waiting breathlessly for some extraordinary manifestation which was to come from those clouds whose sinuous fingers clutched constantly at the earth.

The oppressive nearness of the sky had its effect on the soldiers and stilled all jubilation over their successful expedition. Even the jingle of bits and the occasional clanking of sabers, the clang of horseshoe upon horseshoe, seemed to lack their usual carrying qualities. We were like ghosts at the end of long journeying in an illimitable land of death.

In such fashion we came in sight of Fort Laramie.

I remember that the girl, when we had our

first glimpse of the fort, between the black water-courses where river and creek were joined, caught her breath in a sigh of relief. But it was a sigh that was not echoed by Baptiste and myself, for the sight of the fort brought little joy to us, after all our efforts to reach it, for here was the place where we must part from the girl whom we had come to love more than life.

Yet we could understand the gladness that must possess Annabel, now that the myriad dangers of the wilderness were all at her back. Her gay laughter rang out, and she clapped her hands in glee that proved infectious. A cheer burst from the column of men behind us, and our bugler sent a call echoing toward the sprawling, misshapen post that always held so much of beauty for the weary souls that approached it.

The young lieutenant, who was not averse to making himself agreeable in the eyes of one so attractive as Annabel, proposed that we gallop to the fort, ahead of the rest of the cavalcade.

Annabel had been provided with one of the best horses in the command, and I was still riding the noble animal which I had practically commandeered on my first arrival in the camp. The lieutenant would not have it otherwise than that the man who had slain the dreaded Le Crochet should have the best there was of horseflesh, or any other reward that the command might give. Baptiste had been given a good horse also,

the soldiers we dispossessed finding fairly tractable saddle animals among the score or more of ponies that were captured from the scattered Sioux. Seven of the Dacotah warriors had been slain, in the charge of the troop, following my combat with Le Crochet, and altogether the young lieutenant was feeling that his expedition had been most successful and that he was sure to be the recipient of a commendation from his superior officers at Washington.

As we rode into the compound, the gates having been opened wide to admit us, we swung out of our saddles, and a cheer burst from the motley collection of soldiers, traders, trappers, and Indians that was waiting to greet us. Annabel turned to Baptiste and myself, and clasped our hands in hers.

‘Now, my brothers,’ she cried, ‘are you not thankful for the divine protection that has enabled us to return to this haven through so many dangers?’

Before we could answer, there burst from the crowd about us none other than Annabel’s uncle, Thomas Drayton, who, it seems, had been with one of the last wagon-trains to come through from Salt Lake, and who had remained at the post, hoping against hope to hear some word of his niece. His affectionate greeting, which the girl returned in kind, and the genuine note of contrition with which he begged her forgiveness, left

no doubt that he repented of his endeavor to have her marry so great a scoundrel as Abner.

The girl, whose heart could hold none but the truest affection, harbored no resentment against her uncle for his stupid folly which would have sunk her life in a chaos terrible to contemplate. When he burst into tears, she comforted him with womanly compassion and assured him that all would be as it had been with them before they started for the West.

‘Though you must now remember, Uncle,’ said Annabel firmly, ‘that you must no longer insist upon my taking any course that is against my will, for since I have been away from you my eighteenth birthday is come and gone and I am now a woman in my own right, with no further need of your guardianship.’

The old man took the rebuke meekly. Indeed, he seemed so far from being himself, no doubt from the weeks of worry he had put in since I had taken his niece from the wagon-train, that no one could help pitying him. Since his return to the fort he had spent long hours peering vainly over the parapet, until even the roughest soldiers had been sorry for him.

But it was plain enough that Thomas Drayton and his niece would have no opportunity to return to the East for many weeks to come. The clouds which pressed down so closely about us as we rode to the fort now hurled down snow in

such quantities and with such steadiness that even the oldest of the buffalo-hunters at the fort were amazed and expressed their wonder in terms which grew more forceful from day to day. The old Indians harked back to heavy snowfalls of their boyhood days, but none could find a parallel for the snow that now descended upon us in a white deluge.

For three days the heaviest of the fall continued, and in that time the snow was four feet deep on the level places, and the drifts in the hollows were piled so high that no man or beast might hope to get through them. Then, at intervals of four or five days when we had hopes that the snowfall was over, the sun would be hidden again and more would descend.

As I looked out on the dreary expanse, with nothing to mar its whiteness, I gave thanks each day that we had not been caught in this downfall, for we had surely perished before we could have struggled to safety or before any one could have found us. Indeed, all life on the great plain seemed to be hanging in the balance. Even the hardiest animals had difficulty in foraging amid such mighty drifts. No Indians came to the fort for weeks, and the few that were caught there by the storm had to be taken in and fed at Government expense until they could return to their tribes.

It was apparent enough that there could be no

travel along the great trail until spring. There were weeks of idleness ahead of us at the fort — weeks which brought little pleasure to Baptiste or to me. For with me it had come to be a settled conviction that I must find some way of taking myself out of the lives of Baptiste and Annabel. It was easy for me to see that his loyalty to me had sealed the tongue of Baptiste, and that he would not declare the love that was in his heart. He defeated all my efforts to throw him into the companionship of the girl. If I took snowshoes and went on long hunting expeditions, he went with me, or, if I slipped away alone, I learned afterward that he had gone on a similar expedition in an opposite direction.

Yet the girl had no lack of company at the post, for all this neglect on our part. From the commandant down, there was not a soldier at the fort who was not her willing slave. Three or four of the older officers had brought their wives to this lonely post, and a little social circle was soon in motion, with Annabel as its center. Apparently she enjoyed herself to the utmost, but in reality she felt keenly the loss of our company. One day, when she had met me in a corner of the compound where there was none else about, she reproached me, with tears in her eyes.

‘Is this the way to treat the sister you promised to care for?’ she asked, tremulously.

‘You know that our regard for you is something

more than brotherly,' I answered. 'That being the case, and apparently there being no return of such affection, it has seemed best for us to remove ourselves from your presence. You will soon be going where you can forget all about this country and the savage men, both red and white, which it contains.'

The girl made no answer, but looked at me reproachfully.

'Besides,' I went on bitterly, 'you do not seem to miss our presence. You have enough uniformed worshipers at your feet to keep you interested in life.'

'You have hurt me for the first time, John Crews,' said the girl, 'but I can tell you and Baptiste no more than I told you in our camp. Yes, there is one thing more that I can say. Wait for the first wagon-train from the east.'

'Why should I wait for the first wagons from the east?' I answered, 'when the first wagon-train from the west will be bearing you away from here?'

'I cannot tell you why, but I urge and beseech you to wait for the first wagons along the eastern trail,' said Annabel, even more earnestly than before.

I was puzzled at so cryptic an utterance, for I could not see what possible interest any wagon-train from the east would hold for me, or what bearing it would have on the love of Baptiste and

myself for this girl. I told her so, and went on out of the fort, on the longest and most perilous hunting expedition I had yet taken.

It was not until late in March that the blanket of snow had thinned sufficiently to allow our first Indian visitors to come to the fort. To my surprise and pleasure they proved to be Wolf Bear and a large representation from his tribe. The smallpox had run its course, and the Crows, though decimated, were still strong enough to hold the Sioux or Cheyennes at bay. Eskoche, the medicine man, had himself fallen victim to the disease. The Indians, with the specter of death removed from their camp, and with Eskoche no longer flinging his accusations against us, had ceased to look upon us with superstitious fear. They were eager to make amends for having driven Iron Hand and his friends from the camp, particularly since it had come to them that the slayer of Strikes the Lance had also killed Le Crochet, who was even more dreaded by the Crows. When they came to the fort, therefore, they brought with them all the assurances of the old friendship, and Wolf Bear was importunate in his requests that I come back with them when they made their return journey, which would be in two or three weeks.

I had no desire to go back to the Crows and be their war leader, which they wanted, but there was fomenting in my mind a plan by which I

figured that the Indians might help me. I broached the idea to Wolf Bear, and, though he found it strange, he finally consented.

'Does Iron Hand mean to say,' summed up the chieftain, after I had concluded, 'that he wishes to marry and yet not to marry into the Crow tribe?'

'Let me explain it again,' I said patiently. 'I love this white girl who was so long in the Crow camp. So does my trail partner, Baptiste. I think this girl loves Baptiste. In fact, I am as sure of it as a man can be. Yet she will not show her love for him, as long as I am near. She feels that she owes me her life, and no doubt if I asked her to marry me she would consent — but out of gratitude.'

'Then why does Iron Hand not ask her, and have it all ended?' asked Wolf Bear.

'Because white men do not look at such things as the Indians see them,' I answered. 'You would not care if a woman married you for gratitude, but a white man must have love.'

Wolf Bear nodded, though uncomprehendingly, and smoked on.

'What I want to arrange is a mock marriage with your daughter, little Ook Eas, or Pretty Antelope, as we call her,' I went on. 'But Ook Eas must understand that this is not a real marriage, and that I do not love her and would not marry her. Also, just as soon as I have taken

her out of sight of the fort, she must leave me and return to your camp, while I go on to the north alone, to hunt.'

Wolf Bear smoked awhile in silence, and then he summoned Ook Eas, one of the prettiest and most modest and intelligent Indian maidens I had ever seen. He explained the situation to her as best he could, with much prompting on my part. Ook Eas smiled archly upon me, at the mention of the word marriage, and laughed happily as she gave her consent. Something in her manner gave me uneasiness, but I was resolved to go ahead with my plan, come what might.

To give the mock marriage something of an aspect of reality, in case there should be any doubting on the part of those at the fort, I brought some ponies to the lodge of Wolf Bear. By the time I arrived with the horses — the Indian's only token of wedlock — Ook Eas was in her father's lodge, clad in her prettiest dress of white antelope-skin, trimmed with many elk teeth.

I am afraid I paid scant attention to her, for a bridegroom. After leaving the horses and smoking a pipe with Wolf Bear, I rode to the fort with Ook Eas following close behind me on her pony.

The Indian camp was in the willows along Laramie Creek, where the emigrant camp had been pitched when I had talked with Annabel. Ook Eas and I were inside the compound in a few

minutes. In front of the commandant and the other surprised dwellers at the fort, I rode with my supposed bride. I bought some supplies and tied them on the pony of Ook Eas, and gave it out loudly that I was starting for the north on a hunting-trip.

I knew that the news would be carried to Annabel and Baptiste before many minutes. I had no desire to face either of them, lest the mask of my duplicity be too easily seen through. Signaling to Ook Eas to follow me, I sprang into the saddle and rode out of the fort, and turned to the northern trail.

I looked back, from a hilltop, and it seemed to me that I could descry something moving along the great trail. Then I stopped my horse and looked again, and knew that my eyes had told me the truth.

‘It is the first wagon-train from the east,’ I said aloud. ‘Perhaps I should have waited.’

Then I thought that it was impossible that a wagon-train from east or west could possibly hold anything of interest to me. Urging my horse over the brow of the hill, with the Indian girl following me, I shut out the vision of the crawling wagon-train, the great trail, and Fort Laramie.

CONCLUSION

OLD FORT LARAMIE

The prairie ships that sailed of old
Across the sagebrush sea
Found haven here — thou didst enfold
Distressed humanity.

The wide trail o'er the silvered plain
Led on to new alarms,
But here was rest from strife and pain —
Man slept as child in arms.

Beneath thy gates there ebbled and flowed
The tides that swept the West,
That made from each dim trail a road —
That conquered vale and crest.

And now what ghosts troop through the way
Where flanking bastion grew —
Brave ghosts that whisper of the day
When the Great Trail was new!

From the Wilderness Songs of BAPTISTE BOUCARD

It was with a heavy heart that I rode out of the gate at Fort Laramie, with Ook Eas bobbing along behind me on her pony as I had seen so many Indian women riding behind their white trapper husbands.

Nor was I proud of the rôle I was playing. But the part was being staged for a purpose, and I set my teeth and made a vow that it should go on to the end.

So I turned and flanked the fort, and cut across

to the great trail that led to Oregon, and all the time I could hear Little Antelope's pony pitter-pattering behind me. But she, like a true Indian woman, said never a word to me. It was for me to speak first, even as a play-actor husband and lord.

Three hills we climbed, and finally, when we came to a cross-trail that was faint, indeed, beside the great one, I turned and rode perhaps half a mile. Then I stopped and dismounted.

Pretty Antelope drew her horse up beside mine at the side of the road and looked at me, with something in her eyes which disturbed me.

'Pretty Antelope — little Ook Eas,' I said, 'you have been a good friend to John Crews, and the gifts which I have promised you shall be increased by enough beaver-skins to buy you all the green beads at Fort Laramie.'

Pretty Antelope said no word, but looked at me in a way that was not in the bargain which I had struck so handily in her father's teepee.

'You understand, and have understood from the first,' I said, 'that there was no real marriage?'

Pretty Antelope nodded, in a way that might mean anything.

'Well, then, you are to go back to your people,' I said, 'and some day I may see you again in the Crow country, though now I am going to the Dacotah land, east of your father's lodges.'

Thereupon I climbed once more into the saddle and turned to the north trail, but I had not gone far when I heard the pitter-patter of hoofs behind me once more, and this time they were interspersed with wails from the rider of the pony — wails which only an Indian woman could utter.

We had reached the bottom of a hill, and I had dismounted and was making a foolish effort to dry the Indian girl's tears with a handkerchief that I had worn about my throat, at the same time explaining to her, with much firmness, that she must return and do as I had bade her, when I heard a horse approaching and saw Annabel riding toward me.

She was dressed in a closely fitting riding-suit, the like of which I had never seen before. It was made of some dark rich material, well-nigh as smooth as the fur of the beaver. Its fashion was somewhat like the boy's suit she had worn the night I had taken her from the emigrant camp. Her hair, instead of being in Indian braids as I had seen it these many months, was caught away from her neck and was in a mass of glory atop of her head. There were neat boots on her slender feet, and a tiny spur gleamed at one of her heels.

The while I stared, and as Ook Eas's sobs subsided and the Indian girl joined me in wondering looks, Annabel rode up to me, and let her horse's reins drop to the ground as she dismounted. Then

she put her arms about my neck and, drawing me down close to her, kissed me full on the lips. And she did not loose her clasp from my neck while she called me endearing names, many of them Indian which she had learned in the North Country. And never have I heard such music as those names made — not even in the sweetest songs of the birds in that pleasantest of valleys where we had found the gold and where I had first realized what happiness a woman's presence could bring.

'You don't suppose, John Crews, that I was going to let you get away from me, even with as handsome a wife as little Pretty Antelope, do you?' she said, finally, holding me at arms' length and looking at me in arch disapproval.

'But I told at the fort that I was already married, and this girl had become mine according to Indian marriage law,' I answered.

'I know you let such word be spread, but I did not believe it, and neither did Baptiste. And if it is true, John Crews, why are you deserting your pretty Indian wife before you have more than got her out of sight of Fort Laramie?'

For this I had no answer, other than the one which I suppose all disappointed lovers fall back on at the last.

'I am through with all women,' I replied. 'I am off for the far headwaters, where it's a man's country.'

At that she laughed until her voice enveloped me like so much rippling silver.

‘What a great, foolish boy you are!’ she exclaimed, as her laughter ended chokingly and her eyes became luminous with tears. ‘Am I not as desirable as an Indian wife, John Crews?’

For answer I could only gasp.

‘Then why must I fling myself at your head, even as this Indian girl has done? — I who have loved you since the day you rode into the emigrants’ camp when the Indians threatened us?’

‘But if you loved me all this time, why did you not let me know before?’ I stammered.

‘Because,’ she said, ‘sometimes there is a love that is even greater than woman’s love for a man, or man’s love for a woman. It is when two strong men are in such bonds of comradeship as those which bind you and Baptiste. I would not be the one to break those bonds, nor would I so much as loosen them for one instant. So, though my heart rebelled against it, I was compelled to play that you were on equal terms in my sight. Never would I give an answer, nor so much as a look, if I could help it, that seemed like favoritism. Though my heart hungered for you alone, John Crews, and though the happiest moments I have ever known were those in which you caught me in your great, strong arms in saving me from some threatening danger, never could I show how I

felt, for in doing so I knew that I should have come between you and Baptiste."

'But now,' I said — 'how is it any different now?'

For answer she laughed, and, swinging me around, pointed to the hill down which we had all come.

There was Baptiste, riding toward us, his pony at a walk. He was dressed in new buckskin, and never have I seen him look more lithe and handsome.

Beside him rode a young woman, whom I had never before seen, and yet, as I looked, I could have sworn it was Annabel. There was the same shining black hair, the same grace in the saddle, and a duplicate of the garb worn by the girl at my side. And there even came to me the faint sound of a laugh which I should have taken for Annabel's.

'It is my sister, Louise — she who was in the convent,' said Annabel. 'I had hoped that I might bring her here, and that Baptiste might see in her whatever he thought he loved in me. And when we arrived at the fort I found that my wish was in a way to be answered, for my uncle had sent for her. She came with the first wagon train. To my joy, she and Baptiste seemed to fall in love at first sight.'

'Now I understand why you wanted me to wait for the first wagon train,' I said. 'It was that

Baptiste and Louise might meet, and that our way to love might thus be made clear.'

'Yes, but you would not wait. But do you suppose that I did not know from the first that you had no intention of marrying this Indian girl? I knew, as soon as I heard of it at the fort, that it was merely part of your plan to throw me into Baptiste's arms.'

I could only hang my head, schoolboy fashion. Then I looked again at Baptiste and Louise, as they came near. They were riding close together, their young faces animated with an expression which I knew would soon kindle into love.

It was true then! The way to happiness had been found for Baptiste and myself.

Overmastered by the resistless joy that surged upon me, I took my true love in my arms.

We rode back toward Fort Laramie, and Pretty Antelope went on to her father's lodge.

We halted our horses in the sunset on the last great hill, and looked over the walls of the fort to the unending plains beyond.

There were fewer teepees about the fort than I had ever seen before. But there were more wagons, and more corrals for live stock. Instead of the noises of the Indian camp, the lowing of cattle and the shouts of white men were now predominant.

The red rays of the sun glistened on the bayo-

net of a soldier who was on guard atop of the fort. The call of a bugle set the air quivering, with its sharp, incisive tones.

Far beyond the fort were the white tops of wagons on the great trail, always moving toward the west.

‘This is the end,’ I said. ‘A few years more and there will be no teepees at Fort Laramie, and no more trappers. Probably the fort itself will vanish, and the West will hold only memories of its men in buckskin.’

‘Such a land must always have its brave men,’ said Annabel.

‘And braver women,’ I replied. ‘What can equal the courage of the womanhood in those white wagons — womanhood that is risking everything for love?’

A tremulous smile was her answer. In the girl’s wistful face I seemed to read all the hopes and fears of pioneer women. Nor would I intrude upon her thoughts, as silently, with hands touching, we rode to Fort Laramie upon the longest, broadest trail of love and adventure the world has ever known.

THE END





